

# Bandwagon

Vol. 58 No. 4 2014



The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

# RINGLING BROS AND BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS

10¢

**OFFICIAL**  
Illustrated Souvenir  
**GUIDE**  
TO THE  
Sarasota, Florida  
**WINTER**  
**QUARTERS**  
OF THE  
**GREATEST SHOW**  
**ON EARTH**

Roland  
Butler

Souvenir guide for the Sarasota Winter Quarters, printed circa 1942.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

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The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

2014   Volume 58, Number 4

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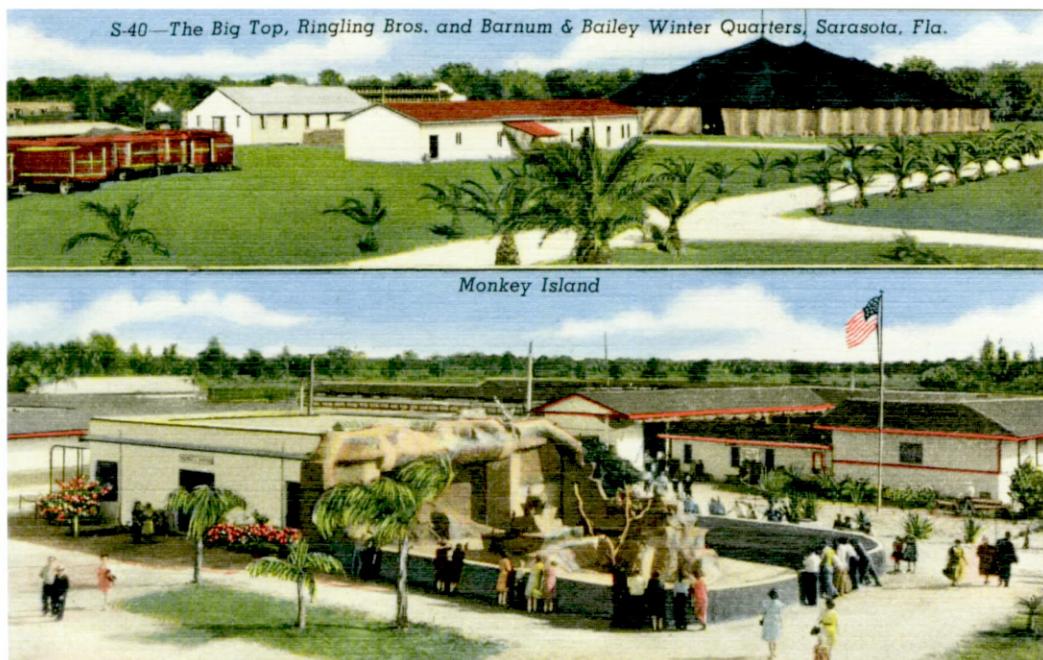
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## Website and Back Issues

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A postcard for Ringling Winter Quarters printed circa 1945.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

# Circus Historical Society

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*"To preserve, promote, and share  
through education the history and  
cultural significance of the circus and  
allied arts, past and present."*

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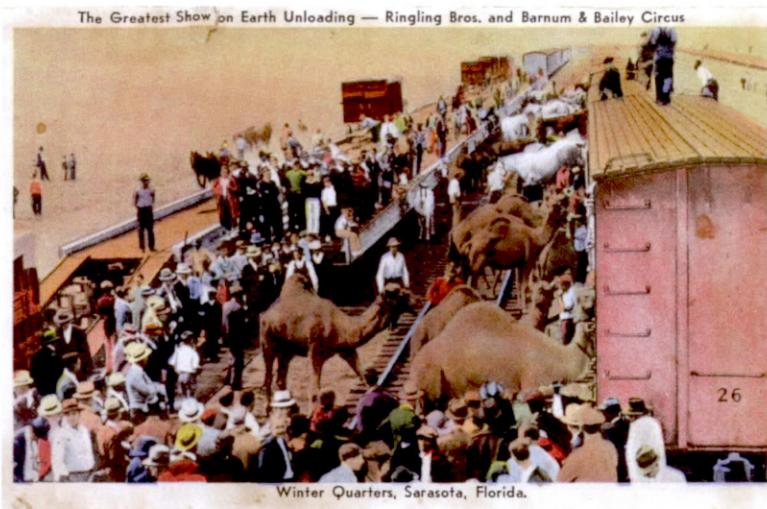
## About the Cover

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

"Spend a Summer this Winter at Sarasota." The remarkable poster on our cover, printed by Strobridge Lithographing Company, described the beauties of the city in both text and image, just like every wonderful circus poster printed in the 1920s described the show's features. One of the greatest assets John Ringling brought to his efforts to spur economic and civic growth in Sarasota was his knowledge of advertising and his business relationship with one of the best printers of the day.

The phrase "Spend a Summer this Winter" can be tracked at least as far back as a December 9, 1923 advertisement in the *New York Times* for Sarasota's Mir-a-Mar hotel, which was under construction in the fall of that year. The phrase next appeared in a February 17, 1924 *New York Times* ad touting Sarasota and Bradenton's "Wonderful Display at Madison Square Garden" as part of the Florida State Exposition published. The poster, now in the collection of Howard and Janice Tibbals, may well have been printed for this exposition.

Inside the front cover and on the back of this issue are covers for programs sold at the Sarasota Winter Quarters. While the covers shifted over time, the material inside, explaining the logistics of the circus in its winter home, stayed essentially the same.



A postcard illustrating the unloading of the Ringling train at the Sarasota Winter Quarters, printed circa 1946.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

## Note from the Editor

In his book *The Big Top*, Fred Bradna recalled John Ringling's vision to "lay out the [Sarasota] quarters like a zoo, and thousands of visitors will pay to see it. I'll build an open-air arena exactly the size of Madison Square Garden, and on Sunday the acts can practice before an audience... Sarasota will become one of the most beautiful cities in Florida." On Christmas Day 1927, the new winter quarters opened its doors to visitors. Families could see circus rehearsals as well as animals from all over the world at what was one of Florida's top tourist attractions at that time. The realization of Ringling's vision created a vibrant link between Sarasota and the circus arts that still exists today.

When we set out to create a special Sarasota winter quarters issue, the wealth of material that percolated up was incredible and it quickly became clear that complete coverage of any of the major winter quarters locations was beyond the page count of a single *Bandwagon* issue. It is my hope that we can continue to explore the stories of the winter homes of American circuses through future research by dedicated circus historians.

This issue scratches the surface of stories related to the Sarasota winter quarters. First, Fred Dahlinger, Jr. chronicles the Ringling show and the decisions that ultimately brought the show from the snowdrifts of Wisconsin to the sunny winters of Florida. This fascinating account sheds light on the relationships between the brothers and their shared decision making process.

The second half of this issue recreates in modern form a scrapbook created by aerialist Dick Anderson as he prepared for the 1943 season at the Sarasota winter quarters.

The first portion is Anderson's written account, which is a marvelous window on what life was like for the performers during the winter months—days filled with rigorous practice combined with leisure time spent enjoying the beaches and other attractions of the area. The second half of the story reproduces a set of images captured on a single day at the winter quarters. Taken as a group, these photographs give a sense of the expansiveness of the property and individually they give valuable details about buildings, wagons and other properties.

This issue is the result of a great deal of collaborative work. Once again I am grateful to the designers at QDX for their hard work in putting together this wonderful issue. I also owe thanks to Pete Shrake at Circus World for quickly providing images, despite the fact that winter weather truly played out the difference between the two winter homes of the Ringling show.

The concept of a Sarasota Winter Quarters issue was first suggested by Deborah Walk, President of the Circus Historical Society. Fred Dahlinger, Jr. did the bulk of the leg work, finding a rich array of material related to our topic and adding his own research to the list. The Anderson journal, part of Howard Tibbals' collection at the Ringling Museum, was discovered, transcribed and annotated by Deborah Walk. Ron Levere performed a massive amount of digitization to allow us to reproduce the images. And a final thank you to Kenneth Dodd, Jackie LeClaire, Mary Jane Miller and Dorita Estes who were extraordinarily helpful in reviewing Dick Anderson's work and identifying some of the individuals mentioned in the text. These individuals and so many others are living proof that the circus community is still a vibrant part of Sarasota.

JLP

## Notice

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. (signed by) Martha Roth Wells, 9/30/14.

# *Snowballs to Baseballs:* **How the Ringling Circus Went from Baraboo to Sarasota**

by Fred Dahlinger, Jr.



*The Ringling circus cages spotted on Water Street in Ringlingville, being prepared to leave winter-time Baraboo in the spring of circa 1905.*

Circus World Museum



## Introduction

During wintertime “up north,” children are tossing snowballs at one another and at surprised hapless victims of their ardor for the fluffy white stuff. It’s an activity that is entirely foreign to most children of the Deep South and particularly Florida, where snow occurs only under the most freakish weather patterns. The kids there are more apt to be tossing baseballs, especially after training camps fill up with teams and the stand with snowbirds, which are enjoying the practice and exhibition games of their favorite teams. This complete difference in geographic climate patterns and the resultant winter activity that was possible has a direct parallel in the history of the circus in America.

The declarative sub-title that details the primary theme of this presentation, “how the Ringling circus went from Wisconsin to Florida,” is an obvious and accurate simplification of the relocation of the Ringling enterprise from way up north to way down south. An interim stop that the operation made at Bridgeport, Connecticut for almost a decade is given only brief consideration. In defense of that omission, it will be argued that the eight-year long hiatus in the Northeast was little more than an extension of the same management mentality that had kept the circus in the upper Great Lakes region for the previous 34 seasons.

In a broader context, the statement also exposes and advances a simple and subtle summary observation. The mantle of national circus leadership, which the Badger State had worn for five decades, from 1870 to 1918, passed to the Sunshine State between the spring and fall of 1927. Thereafter, the southernmost state would host more circus winter quarters and witness the inauguration of a greater number of new traveling shows than any other member of the union. Further research may well indicate that the total number of Wisconsin circus proprietorships, now pegged at about sixty, may well be exceeded by Florida’s nearly uninterrupted and currently ongoing activity.

The change in circus wintertime venues was caused by John Ringling’s decision to relocate his family’s outdoor show base of operations; however, like the explanation of a mechanical failure as a connected series of critical, discrete events, the roots of the move reached back many years and reflected a long series of seemingly disconnected events that culminated in a single profound action. Ringling’s decision was an inflection point; it became both the culmination of accumulated history and the fiduciary point for an entirely new era that is still actively being played out today.

The circus exodus from the north didn’t stop in 1927. Wayne Franzen, who in 1974 became the last man to organize an enduring traveling circus in the Wisconsin cold, quickly re-established his quarters in Florida.

The following account explores the path and factors that caused the Ringling show to relocate from the snowy north to the sunny south and how it played an influential role in

future troupes establishing in the Sunshine State. It’s not just the story of a circus enterprise, but one of family life, residency, and a search for identity and enduring security.

## Welcome to Wisconsin

If you ask the general public across America which community the Ringling circus called home they usually don’t say McGregor, Baraboo, Bridgeport, Venice, Palmetto, or Ellenton. They declare “Sarasota.” Though the city was not the origin of the famous brothers operation and served as the headquarters for only 32 years, two less than Baraboo, and one more than Venice, it is the city where the circus enjoyed and basked in the zenith of its national reputation as the leading traditional tented railroad circus of international renown. The “top of mind” site recognition was the culmination of three elements: the annual national circus tours; the sustained promotion of the city in the show programs and other media; and the establishment of a tourist-friendly winter quarters that could be visited during the bitter winter season in the North.

The question that starts this geographic analysis is “How and why did the Ringling circus start in Baraboo and remain there for 34 years?” While the late spring, summer and early autumn seasons in Wisconsin can all be quite beautiful, the winter can be quite brutal, with a sub-freezing 21 degrees Fahrenheit the seasonal average. Drifts of snow and sub-zero cold obstruct daily life and commerce. Below zero temperatures, like the -21°F reached on a day when this paper was being researched, are not uncommon.

So, one asks, why Wisconsin? The larger picture of the Ringling geography is summarized in major life themes: immigration; childbirth; and work. It contrasts sharply from those who initiated Wisconsin’s heritage as a circus state, Edmund and Jeremiah Mabie, who were guided by their routing decisions.

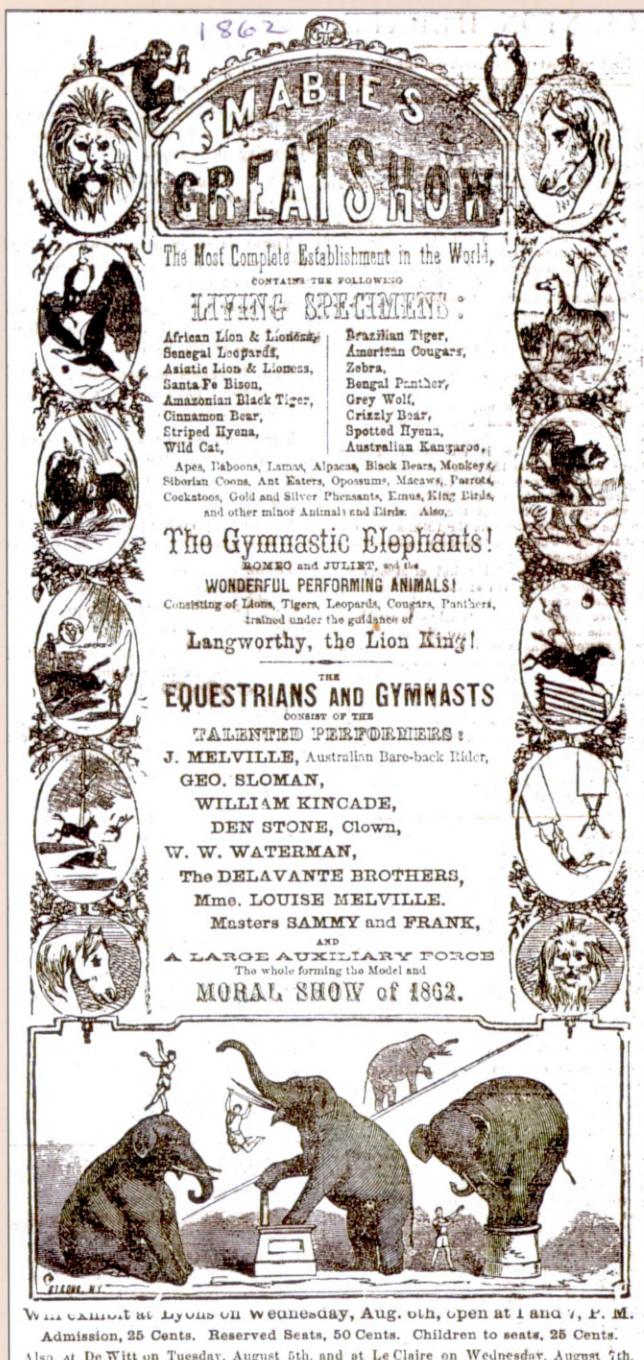
## Baraboo

Father August Ringling was an immigrant. He came from German parentage, a native of Hannover. His journey to the New World took place during the first of the two great waves of German immigration to the United States. Landing in Quebec, Canada, August continued on to Milwaukee and it became his first American home. Wisconsin was a favored destination for those leaving the Fatherland and headed towards American opportunities and a better life.

At one time, half of the state’s citizens claimed a Germanic heritage, nearly triple the national percentage. All one had to do was to peruse the city directory, the voter registrations or the census schedules to realize that the Koches, Machts, and Pulvermachers vastly outnumbered all other nationalistic groups of Smiths and Joneses. German language newspapers and churches, Germania clubs and business associates from the homeland all made it a hospitable

## The Circus Comes to Wisconsin

The Mabie brothers hailed, as many early overland showmen did, from the counties just upstate from New York City, Putnam and Westchester. They chose Delavan, Wisconsin as their western winter quarters for specific economic and logistical reasons. It was centrally located so that they could play an entire seasonal route



An 1862 Mabie Bros. advertisement.

Circus World Museum

in what was then "the West," or what we'd term the Midwest today. That wasn't possible when they quartered in the East; by the time the horse-paced outfits reached their destination they'd have to turn back so that quarters would be reached before winter was upon them. The distance was over 900 miles from their base of operations and the season was just thirty weeks. The four to five mile per hour pace of a walking horse, coupled with a route that was based upon visiting communities located at county lines and county seats, dictated the westernmost point that could be reached.

The increasing settlement density in the West also provided economic opportunity for shows that wanted to escape the well-traveled eastern states. There were already too many shows in the Atlantic coast corridor.

The gentle rolling hill country in southeastern Wisconsin was great for grazing animals but not so highly valued for crops. It was harder on the draft horses and the farmer guiding the team going up and down even gentle grades, not to mention erosion and the weather-limited growing season. That meant the Wisconsin acreage was cheaper than the flatlands of slightly warmer Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. Food for horses and other animals was abundant and economical.

The land adjacent to Lake Delavan was, by their judgment, and also by the later assessment of showman W. C. Coup, one of the prettiest places on earth. The state was also hospitable towards travelers, perhaps an outgrowth of its pervasive immigrant status that welcomed so many settlers with open arms. It's alleged that the nascent Wisconsin state legislature adjourned when the first traveling show came to Madison.<sup>1</sup> The body visited the show en masse to demonstrate by their own action the support for the visitors from out of state. It may have been the first governmental demonstration of a viable marketing action taken towards what would later become a staple of the current Wisconsin economy—tourism. Delavan's thriving as a center and anchor for Wisconsin's heritage, as a circus-hospitable state, commenced in the late 1840s and continued through 1894. Within the city confines was a critical mass of experienced showmen, available equipment and trained and menagerie animals that could outfit a traveling circus. The circuses whose origins can be traced to the community include the two that would eventually dominate the trade, Barnum and Ringling. The Mabie movement to the west served as a model for other showmen, who established quarters in the Midwest.



*Moeller Wagon Shop*

Circus World Museum

new home filled with *gemütlichkeit* for the newcomers.

So, why Baraboo? That choice we would assign to motherhood and sisterhood. August Ringling met Salome Julian, whose family owned a farm in the southwest Milwaukee suburb of Franklin and married her in February 1852. The pending birth of their first son, Albert Charles, in December, caused Salome to seek the companionship of her older sister, who had married a blacksmith named Gottlieb Gollmar. They resided in Chicago with their two children and that is where the expectant couple temporarily relocated so that the sister could assist her during her confinement and childbirth. Salome and August enjoyed the healthy birth of their first son and then returned to Milwaukee and the husband's handmade leather goods trade.

In 1855 the Ringlings relocated to Baraboo. It was where the Gollmars had moved and they proved to be the draw for the Ringlings and their two sons, A. G. or "Gus" having been born in mid-1854. They arrived hard on the heels of the Panic of 1853, the effects of which pervaded the national economy. August's trade may have slumped in the big city and Gollmar may have assured his brother-in-law that there was work to be found in the hinterlands.

A two-decade long period of continuing economic insecurity, a duration marked by lingering financial panics in 1857 and 1873 and the Civil War, was endured by the Ringlings. Their family challenges were hallmarked by multiple

relocations to: McGregor, Iowa (where the brothers experienced their first circus); Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin; Stillwater, Minnesota; and then back to Baraboo about 1875.

Another of Salome's sisters, surely attracted by the Gollmars' success in Baraboo, had married another local craftsman, Henry Moeller. The couple established their residency in Baraboo, where Moeller made carriages and wagons and gave interim employment to August Ringling. The older Ringling sons, Al and Gus, each taught a trade like the father, were already leaving home to seek their fortunes by this time.

### Circus Crazy

A life punctuated by family hardship stood in sharp contrast to the glamor and glitter that the Ringling boys witnessed when they observed circus activity. The appearances of the Dan Rice and Stowe shows in McGregor, Iowa in the 1860s have become embedded in the family lore. Al, the oldest Ringling brother, their leader and the one that had truly gone circus-crazy, and favored son John, a precocious thirteen-year old who was the most headstrong of the seven, initiated the circus connection. The duo spent the summer of 1879 with Dr. Morrison's Coliseum out of Delavan, Wisconsin. They also toured with other local Midwestern showmen, including Fayette Lodawick "Yankee" Robinson through 1883.

The brothers believed that they had accumulated adequate management and performing skills by the winter of 1882-1883, so they took a risk. They inaugurated their first public effort, a hall show, to be presented in innumerable upstairs opera houses around Wisconsin and the Midwest. The hall show was their cash cow, the means by which they gained capital and saved it against the day when they had enough to start their dream show—a circus. The state population was then about 1.5 million.

The Ringling parents and their two youngest of eight surviving children, son Henry and daughter Ida, packed up in Baraboo and moved again, north to Rice Lake, Wisconsin, in November 1883. It was another hinterlands location judged by August to be in need of his increasingly obsolescent, handmade leather goods. The move left their older sons scattered about, mostly bachelors residing in the Warren Hotel on the northeast corner of the square in Baraboo. They were left to their own free will, as young adults, in a community selected by their aunts and uncles and embraced by their parents. The experience of being alone, but together, may have been a reason why they developed such strong bonds, as they undertook to launch their new enterprise.

It was in these circumstances that the brothers initiated their lives as circus men in early 1884. The Sauk County area provided some useful resources for application to their enterprise. The nearby tamarack swamps and tree stands was where they cut their poles and stakes. Horses and second hand dray wagons were bought locally to get them to the next community. The local source of cash, the Bank of Baraboo, extended loans to their uncles, Gottlieb Gollmar and Henry Moeller, starting in 1882 and on July 3 of the next year Al Ringling obtained \$37.00 for himself from the cashier. They didn't need a loan to take out their show until 1885, when they received \$100.00, the amount increasing each year thereafter.

Delavan, the circus center where Al and John were



Salome Julian Ringling's home

Circus World Museum

known to at least a few in the business, served as the source for a tent and perhaps other circus properties. Baraboo provided a good opening day house (meaning cash flow), a satisfactory endorsement in the local newspaper (useful since they were unknowns from a small town) and good wishes (encouragement is good for the ego), all important when their first day of operation was punctuated by operational imperfections, seating that collapsed and a dressing top that fell down. "Baraboo's Own" circus prospered and grew. It was embraced by the community because the boys showed great promise and unified determination, living examples of Horatio Alger in their midst. The show gave Baraboo a pretty unique standing and provided much needed employment for farm boys and infused cash flow into community businesses.

With their circus on the road for much of the year, especially until the end of their hall show days in early 1888, the commitment of the brothers to the community was initially represented by their rooming at the Warren Hotel and the leasing of various spaces and properties around the community that were needed to prepare the show for the annual tours. They moved their preparatory activity from upper rooms downtown and elsewhere and aggregated them into an old factory along the river, which they purchased in the fall of 1887. Land along the meandering Baraboo River, which was not one that supported water-borne commerce, was cheap because it was marshy, uneven and required filling before reasonable use.

### Baraboo Residency and Community

Nurturing the growth of the circus was more important than the procurement of private residences, at least until the boys took wives. They leased and then bought land to expand their winter quarters throughout the 1890s, erecting wooden barns and masonry houses for their animals, equipment, and practice facilities. Generally, their personal lives also progressed as they married, leased off-season rooms and houses around the downtown area, had children, and finally established their own individual residences.

Accelerating change, fueled by the prosperity of their circus, marked the local Baraboo face of the Ringlings in the 1890s. August, Salome, and their young daughter Ida returned from Rice Lake to the city in January 1890 and occupied a home on Broadway and Bench [now First] Avenue, before moving into two different Second Avenue places near the county jail. The brothers had far surpassed their father's vocational achievements and except for his paternal anchorage and appearance in the famous family portrait he is transparent until his death in 1898.

Regardless of where their business and personal interests took them, they all gathered in Baraboo for the Christmas holiday. The return of the brothers to Baraboo for their annual planning meeting was scheduled to occur at the

same time as the family's Christmas dinner, celebrated at their mother's home. She bought property on Oak Street in 1900 and the brothers erected a new residence for her. The annual dinners ceased upon her death in early 1907.

Like worker bees from a nest, the four oldest Ringling brothers acted in unison in 1899 and bought residential lots in the city of Baraboo and constructed homes within the next twelve months. With the land purchases taking place within six weeks of one another, there surely had to have been a joint decision to take action. That was the way that the brothers spent their money. There may be various reasons why they felt compelled to act, including the 1898 passing of their father, the additional work of leasing the John Robinson circus for the 1898 season and the lessening of pressure on them by the late 1897 departure of Barnum & Bailey for a five-year tour of Europe. The last act may have been a de facto assessment that America was getting too small for giant shows, so the one managed by James A. Bailey sought profits elsewhere. This time, it was the unrelentingly successful Ringling enterprise that caused the pressure on other showmen.

Second-oldest brother Gus, whose marriage to Annie in 1883 was the first to take place, was living and working up in Minnesota and didn't come back to Baraboo until 1890. He responded to his brothers' call for him to manage their first railroad advance car and installed his family at 8<sup>th</sup> and Birch, before moving by 1895 to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They remained there until they bought property and built a modest balloon frame American Foursquare house in 1900 on a rise on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, just west of Broadway.

The couple always seemed to be set apart from the rest of the brothers in their actions, perhaps resulting from Gus's past retail employment, his circus employee status or Annie's Roman Catholicism, to which her husband had converted. Family relations were cordial through Gus's death. Then, surprisingly, his daughters sued the Ringling brothers for what they felt was his share in the circus, becoming the first publicly-known breach in the family. To avoid a major public debacle brother Otto negotiated a financial settlement that seems to have driven something of a wedge between the descendants. Gus's widow remained in their home until moving to Chicago and taking a second husband, who turned out to be a flim-flam artist that married her to avoid prosecution for fraud. Little else is known of the ill-fated union, which Gus's brothers worked quietly and successfully to nullify.

Al and Lou, who apparently abandoned her first husband and several children in Iowa before she removed to Baraboo and met Al, cohabitated from 1883 until they were actually married in 1890, presumably after her first husband had passed away or agreed to a divorce. The specific circumstances of Lou's departure remain a mystery. No relevant documentation has yet been discovered; her story



*Home of Gus and Annie Ringling*

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*Al Ringling and his wife Lou*

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*Home of Al and Lou Ringling*

Circus World Museum



Charles and Edith Ringling

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Home of Charles and Edith Ringling Circus World Museum



Home of Alf T. and Della Ringling

Circus World Museum

is punctuated with unexplained trips and other lore that has yet to be explained. Leaving the Warren by 1895, they commenced to reside on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, just west of Broadway, and then moved a few blocks northwest, onto 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue in 1898. The couple purchased what has been termed their parents residential location, at Broadway and Fifth Avenue, and upon it built the first of the Ringling brother-owned homes, a Queen Anne. They augmented the real estate in 1904 and then in 1906 occupied the biggest and most palatial residence in Baraboo, a Lake Superior red sandstone mansion they erected on Broadway, just off the square.

Charles and Edith were married in 1889 and after leaving the Warren Hotel lived over Matthews' downtown grocery and then moved into an unusual and still standing side-by-side on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, the other half used by his sister, Ida. For a period around 1898 they lived on East Street and in 1900 they moved into their big, new yellow and white Colonial Revival on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, the main east-west thoroughfare of Baraboo.

Alf T. and his bride of 1890, Della, first took rooms over Horstman's meat market, downtown and then rented a cottage on 8<sup>th</sup> Street near Oak in 1895. After residing on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue west of Broadway in 1898 they went up the Oak Street hill and bought a sloping plot of land at 10<sup>th</sup> and on it erected a very large home, the second by the brothers and the first one of truly ostentatious proportions, in 1899. Of all the brothers, Alf T. would build the biggest homes, seemingly compensating for his low profile within the circus operation by the mass and weight of his domestic construction.

Otto remained a bachelor and after leaving the Warren Hotel usually took a room with Alf T. and Della. His abandonment of personal items in their residence, such as his personal circus book collection, after he moved to New York City in late 1907, has caused some of his things to be mistakenly labeled as Alf T.'s in later years.

John's marriage to his beloved Mable wasn't accomplished until December 1903, later than all six of his brothers and his sister. To the best of our knowledge, John never established permanent roots in Baraboo, his adult residency limited to his room at the Warren. He moved on to Chicago as soon as he convinced his brothers to open a Chicago office. John's life in post-fire, post-world's fair Chicago fueled his growth as a businessman and capitalist, the most visionary of his family.

In his bachelor days, Henry lived on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. After taking Ida as his bride in 1902, they resided on Oak, just south of Broadway, and then took accommodations in a number of different homes, including Rev. H. H. Happell's on Ash in 1909-1910. They finally purchased and settled into Charles' big place on Broadway for a few years before it was eventually relegated to summer home status. To the best of our knowledge, Henry never constructed a new home in Baraboo; he rented and then bought from others, never

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BY LIBERATI'S PEERLESS BAND OF 60 SELECTED SOLOISTS.

seeming to have escaped their influence after he went on a bender early in his career.

The brothers' local Baraboo charitable activity was nonexistent, very secret or limited to providing jobs when called upon for assistance. Their posture was probably impacted by their treatment in the poverty of their youth, and by the taxation they experienced. There are only two monetary gifts documented openly in the local community. The first was made shortly after Gus's death, supporting the purchase of a pipe organ for St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, the one attended by his widow, Annie Ringling. A few years later, Al made a gift to the Lutheran church of which he was a member, shortly before he passed away.

All of the brothers joined the local Baraboo Masonic Lodge No. 34 in 1891, their ceremonial aprons recently acquired by the lodge. They were also active in St. John's Commandery of the Knights Templar, in Reedsburg, from 1891 through 1893. Al was a member of the Lutheran church, Alf T. and his wife attended Trinity Episcopal and Henry and Ida were members of the Presbyterian church. To some degree the brothers' wives were socially active, especially in hosting tea and dinner parties following the completion of their new Baraboo residences.

### Business Elsewhere and Mortality

Baraboo remained a winter home and preparation site for the Ringling train, wagons, animals, equipment and properties through the winter of 1917, but the lives of the brothers and the progressive business of their expanding circus holdings was more often than not taking place elsewhere already by the mid-1890s. John happily escaped Baraboo for Chicago, the city to which the brothers had relocated their spring opening in 1895. The Windy City was the railroad center of the country; thereby being a hub of some importance in the railroad circus world. The brothers opened a business office in the Loop to sustain and conduct local business.

Henry and Gus, the two brothers who did not start as owners of the circus in 1884, were sent under Al's tutelage to Columbus, Ohio in the spring of 1905 to manage the Forepaugh-Sells circus. The brothers owned it in partnership with James A. Bailey for one season, 1905, and mostly on their own for a second and third. The brothers closed that circus after the 1907 tour and the duo came home, Gus passing away in December of that year, the first to die.

Starting in the fall of 1907, John and Otto refocused their lives around New York City, close to the Bridgeport winter quarters and physical plants of the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth and Buffalo Bill's Wild West, both of which they had purchased. Within an hour's train commute to New York City, Bridgeport was a convenient location from which to launch the big date in Madison Square Garden. Otto divided his time between a Manhattan resi-

dence, perhaps John and Mable's Fifth Avenue apartment, the Bridgeport quarters and on the road with Barnum & Bailey, his presence forever gone from Baraboo.

After Otto passed away in 1911, John and Alf T., along with Henry, who had obtained title to Otto's share in the family circus business, managed the eastern show, Barnum & Bailey, and the Bridgeport winter quarters. Al and Charlie had domain over the western circus, the Ringling outfit, and Baraboo quarters operations, the Chicago office employing paid staff. Charlie and Edith Ringling moved to Evanston, Illinois, their son having matriculated at Northwestern University.

Alf T. was divorced in 1913 by his wife, Della, who resented the circus and the people of it in all regards. In 1912, he started his life anew in a huge country manor he erected over several years on 550 acres near Petersburg, New Jersey. It was in the countryside due west from Alpine, on the Palisades overlooking the Hudson River. He also remarried.

Alpine was where John and Mable bought and maintained an estate of palatial elegance and vast proportions between 1918 and 1929. It had belonged to William S. Opdyke, a New York attorney, counsel to the Delaware & Hudson Railroad, and a good friend of New York Mayor Jimmy Walker, a friend of John's. It had a wine cellar so huge and inviting to thieves, in an era marked by Prohibition, that the state police reportedly built a station close by to guard it.

As Al's physical condition declined, Henry, who was not the picture of health himself, was asked to remain in Baraboo, watching over his older brother and the quarters. Henry did so until heart disease debilitated him to the point he could not work. The year before Al passed away the Wisconsin state legislature had issued a decree identifying him as America's leading circus man, even though his heyday was then past and he was slowly dying from a lingering illness. His initial unbridled passion for the circus and his singular dedication to it in all ways, along with the natural talent that he showed in managing performance caused all of his brothers, including John, to defer to him. Baraboo never had a greater benefactor, his dedication to the community espoused in the local 1916 headline that unabashedly declared "A. Ringling...World's Greatest Showman...Dead." The affable, oldest and most beloved brother, Al, ensconced with his estranged wife Lou in their big red sandstone mansion died on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1916.<sup>2</sup>

Al's independent and spirited widow settled with the brothers over Al's circus share, the big house and the palatial theater he'd erected. She left with cash and artifacts and relocated to a dowager Victorian home known as the Wigwam, eventually building recreational hotels in Lake Delton and Crystal Lake, Illinois, both of which burned up with the loss of her investments. Local gossip linked her with her chauffeur, which was given some substance when her brothers-in-law had her will, which gave him everything, contested

and thrown out of court after her passing. Up to the present day, Ringling family items have reached the market owing to her retention of their personal items.

The giant-sized Henry, the youngest brother, was totally obscured in his brothers' shadows and resided quietly in Charlie's former home until he passed in 1918. His widow lived adequately long to object to a Milwaukee brewery funding the re-creation of the circus street parade in the 1960s, despite her reported personal indulgence in a high octane draft root beer years earlier. Their home remained in the hands of Henry's great-grandchildren until sold for conversion into a bed and breakfast in the autumn of 2014.

Alf T.'s ex-wife, Della, never re-married, embraced Roman Catholicism and in 1922 donated their grand and unoccupied home at 10<sup>th</sup> and Oak Streets to serve as Baraboo's first hospital, St. Mary's-Ringling Manor. It was demolished in 1974, but the successor institution, St. Clare Hospital, still serves the community, owned by a religious order from St. Louis, where, by coincidence, there was once a branch of the Ringling extended family.

Baby sister Ida and her steam locomotive engineer husband, Henry North, who passed away in 1911, moved from a Birch Street location into mother Ringling's former home, which her brothers deeded to the couple. The family was hardly noticed until after Al died in 1916 and she and her brood were relocated in 1919 into Al and Lou's former manse on Broadway; then owned by John. He and Ida had grown close when they were both in Chicago in the 1890s, an older brother watching over the young sister. John played the field and Ida obtained an education in music while secretly seeing the widower with children, who she eventually married over the reported objection of her family. In time the rift healed. Ida moved out of the big house which was acquired by the Elks, who transferred it in 2013 into private ownership that will convert it into a bed and breakfast.

### Grounds for Departure

Through the spring of 1918 the circus continued to operate the principal Ringlingville quarters site along Water Street, the Car Shops in another area along the river known as the "flats," and a large farm for the baggage stock off Lynn Avenue, known to some as "Icicle Hill." [Circus man Floyd King, who visited Baraboo to buy wagons in the 1920s, is the source of the nickname.] The triumvirate of locations served as the staging areas for the spring departure and fall return of their circuses. The annual rituals that once attracted wide notice in the community seemed like they would never end and were marginalized and taken for granted, like candy given too frequently to a child, from special event status to ordinary life experience. When a fifty-car Forepaugh-Sells train pulled out in 1911 not a single local resident bothered to witness the departure.<sup>3</sup> The repetitious nature of the events, repeated for more than 20 years, concealed the fact

that change had been constantly underway.

Provincial resentment of the brothers' extraordinary financial success proliferated and led to the local change of attitudes from "Our circus boys" to "those circus people." Personal visits exemplify the change. John brought his flashy and powerful Pierce automobile to Baraboo in 1905. Though it was at least five times more costly than anything else that had chugged along the city's streets before, the local newspaper gave it lip service at a time when a major Chicago newspaper aggrandized Mable Ringling as a modern woman for her motoring prowess.<sup>4</sup> It was such slights that apparently caused John to intensely detest provincial Baraboo, according to his nephew Henry North, causing him to coin the derisive "Baraboobians."<sup>5</sup> Soon, monumental upheaval, the response to a culmination of international and national forces, would change the association between the Ringlings and Baraboo forever.

Taxation was an anathema to the self-made, independent Ringling entrepreneurs, ever more painful to them as they remembered their childhood poverty. When Cook County assessed a personal property tax in 1903, John Ringling's status went from nothing to \$100,000 overnight, which caused reporters to suggest that he'd proclaim Baraboo as his residence, even though he resided on Bellevue Place in the Gold Coast of Chicago. His attitude in the matter must have been well known to them and others. John was sued over \$1259 in back taxes in 1906 and in 1908 it was said that he was a worse tax dodger than John D. Rockefeller, having evaded the process servers for over two years.<sup>6</sup> An assistant district attorney's threat to attach the Ringling show when it came to town that year finally caused John to accept being served. Awkward personal publicity was OK, but you didn't mess with the circus; that was business, and it also involved his four brothers. This episode was only a blip on the tax screen that would raise its head in a major way, against both the circus and John personally in the 1930s. To some degree, John's disinterest may have originated in his itinerant lifestyle. He was traveling more than resident in any one community and it may have aroused a feeling that he was more a man of the road than part of the landed gentry.

The Ringlings paid substantial real estate taxes, and with Wisconsin being a progressive and reform-minded state the Ringlings joined all other Badgers in becoming the first citizens in the nation to pay a state income tax. The latter was initiated by the legislature in 1911 at 1% on \$1000 or more and 6% on incomes \$12,000 and higher, the category into which the Ringlings fell. The brothers, who had earned their way out of their parents' poverty by sheer hard work, rationalized that they were being penalized for providing jobs and prosperity. One legislator publicly complained that the recently deceased Otto Ringling hadn't paid his fair share of the state expenses, an insensitive remark that really goaded the Ringlings.<sup>7</sup>



*Ringlingville quarters photographed circa 1905.*

Circus World Museum

The brothers' concern about the new tax was the subject of a letter from Al to Charlie on March 6, 1912: "We do not know what to do in this matter. Will you be here soon, or will you suggest to us what you think we should do in the matter . . .?"<sup>8</sup> The brothers' sudden announcement of a plan to relocate the Ringling circus to New York, which actually meant nearby Bridgeport, Connecticut, was taken seriously, especially after a letter from Charlie to the *Baraboo News* declared that the five brothers paid about  $1/20$  of the entire city tax bill, Baraboo then a city of six to seven thousand. The mayor convened a panel of leading citizens on April 23, 1912 and issued a proclamation that declared "We pledge our loyalty and offer our undivided support to Ringling Brothers and express the hope that their business interests may not be antagonized to any extent that will necessitate the removal from Baraboo of their permanent winter quarters." Battles for jobs are nothing new; they were being waged a century ago.

In the longer term, the brothers relegated the preparation of both their personal and corporate taxes to a Portage attorney, John M. Kelley, who'd won a substantial savings for them in a personal injury case in Missouri a few years before. The total delegation of their personal and business

tax filings to him would play a major role in John Ringling's ousting as de facto head of the family circus in 1932; and to a federal prison term for Kelley.

Despite annual, multiple, veiled threats leaked to the newspapers to seek winter quarters elsewhere because of the Wisconsin tax situation, the community and the state pressed forward in furthering anti-business policies.<sup>9</sup> The successive deaths of the brothers left just three, John, Charlie, and Alf T., alive at the end of the 1918 tours. They were financially secure, but carried on the circus largely as something to do, for profit and fun, and in fulfillment of their parents' hard work ethic. It also provided continuing employment for valued, long-term staff members and other employees seeking to better their position in life. It was also their principal cash cow. Retirement wasn't their goal; they continued to work, their competent and capable managers and department heads stepping in whenever they wanted to take a break to re-charge, a vacation, or a trip far away.

#### Two Become One

World War I was underway in Europe and a deadly influenza epidemic was raging across America. The unrelenting daily commitment of the railroads to move the two huge



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, 1919.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

80-car Ringling-owned circuses (eight train crews and cabooses, between eight and sixteen locomotives, main lines and side tracks, terminal and switch men, and fuel consumption and ash handling) received increasing scrutiny by the United States Railroad Administration, the governmental body that presided over the industry. Some thought that there was a better use for the nation's resources during wartime.

In an unprecedented action taken for the first time, the Pennsylvania Railroad refused to honor its obligation to move Hagenbeck-Wallace in August 1918, citing the war-related release clause embedded in the contract. Other railroads were also declining, at will and without notice, to move individual theater cars with their passenger trains.

The brothers rightfully feared that one or both of their mighty circuses might be left stranded mid-season, losing the ability to earn revenue and cover their high daily expenses; or to be left marooned at some distance from their quarters in Baraboo and Bridgeport at season's end. There was also concern about a shortage of labor, always in demand in the spring when the shows were being made ready

for the road and in the fall, at harvest time, and through the winter. It was felt that they could manage a single wintering operation, but two sites seemed increasingly questionable.

Plans to consolidate the winter quarters of the two circuses into one had already been rumored, or proposed, in 1909 and 1915, with Bridgeport slated for closure. When Al and Henry were alive the voting majority and Al's acknowledged leadership tipped the balance for Baraboo, but they had passed away in January 1916 and October 1918. With their deaths and the fear of further governmental interference, the consolidation plans were implemented and Bridgeport received the nod. The decision was made very late in 1918, somewhat abruptly and without broad notice, especially to Baraboo. The fuel bins and hay lofts were already filled in Ringlingville, in anticipation of the return of the circus. Conversely, the ability of the show to continue occupancy of the quarters at Bridgeport wasn't exactly clear; the facility had been leased and partially occupied by the Hawthorne Manufacturing Company to do government work that took place in the elephant house, ring barn, and on the railroad spur tracks. It was apparently a late decision

by the feds that enabled the circus to return home. A decision regarding consolidation of the two circuses into one may have won the day for Bridgeport.<sup>10</sup>

The *Billboard* first reported the change of Ringling quarters from Baraboo to Bridgeport in its October 5, 1918 issue, meaning that the news had been leaked about a week before. The “home run” contracts for an October 18 closure were already in place by then, revealing how early the formal decision had been made. Charlie Ringling personally confirmed it when the show closed ten days early on October 8 at Waycross, Georgia, the flu epidemic given as the reason for essentially all circuses closing prematurely. He was paraphrased as stating “there might be a consolidation of both shows, as the Ringlings did not deem it practicable to have two shows on the road next year. If they were fortunate enough to put out a show next season it would be a combined Ringling and Barnum & Bailey Circus.” The entire staff was in an uproar, intensified? by the fact that Charlie didn’t sign anyone to contracts for the following year, as had been routinely done in the past. Performers went home, not knowing if they had a job for the 1919 tour.

Despite seeming clarity to some in 1918, the circumstances of the decision might have been withheld from Henry Ringling, who had returned home in very poor health from a Chicago hospital, near death. Years later his wife Ida recalled that the Ringling show train was already on the “home run” to Baraboo when news reached Charlie and John on the train of Henry’s passing. That may have been the explanation that Ida was given after the fact, the couple having been kept in the dark so that they would not be upset by Henry’s obvious loss of responsibility at the heavy hands of his older brothers.<sup>11</sup>

Reportedly without consulting the ailing Alf T., John, and Charlie had already re-contracted the Ringling home run to terminate in Bridgeport and not Baraboo. Alf T. had previously expressed his preference for the eastern city, which was closer to his own New Jersey home. That essentially left Henry as the odd man out, again, under the domain of his older brothers. Henry passed away on November 11, the same day on which Americans learned that Germany had signed the Armistice ending World War I at the eleventh hour.

In a brief notice without explanation, entering into the realm of denial, the local Baraboo newspaper simply advised that the circus wasn’t coming back. Ringlingville entered a period of Miss Haversham-like suspended animation, a bride ready to receive her groom and guests at any moment.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the Ringling show was fully committed elsewhere and no ceremonial return ever took place. It wouldn’t be until a few years later that the loss settled in and laments over the city’s unique and multi-faceted loss would be articulated openly in the newspaper. A reporter noted in 1924 that, “Sentimental Baraboo looks on all these



Henry Ringling as pictured in the 1897 Route Book.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

violent changes of [Ringlingville] tenants with tolerances ill-concealed, and with many sighs for the good old days when the ‘quarters’ teemed with aristocratic animal life and was the arena of orderly, organized human aspiration.” The old saw that you don’t appreciate what you have until it was gone readily explains the situation.<sup>13</sup>

There was no outcry from the community leadership; no effort made to reverse the brothers’ decision or to seek a broader explanation. A letter sent to Charlie Ringling by the Baraboo city council in mid-1919 inquired about the show’s return that fall. In spite of the circuses having been consolidated, his response raised hopes of a possible return, but it may only have been an attempt to have the Baraboo real estate taxes on the quarters reduced in their favor. Many locals resented the concessions that the Ringlings had received before, assumed to have been made at their expense.

Others realized that the factors underpinning the departure were beyond their control, such as state laws governing corporate activity, or the topic more important in the brothers’ eyes, taxes, which they were unwilling to change. The brothers’ arguments for adjusted rates in 1912 had been based upon: the short lifespan of their equipment; their earning of just 3% of their annual income in the state; the brothers’ largely and increasing non-resident status; the payment of fees and taxes elsewhere; and the high risks of the traveling operation. Many of these same issues remain on the table for traveling showmen nearly a century later as they battled to remain economically viable.

The immediate action taken by the Baraboo city fathers to balance their budget for 1919 was not to adjust their expenses, but to substantially raise the valuation of other properties, especially those of other businesses, like Hertfort Canning and the woolen mills, and undeveloped land.

## Bridgeport

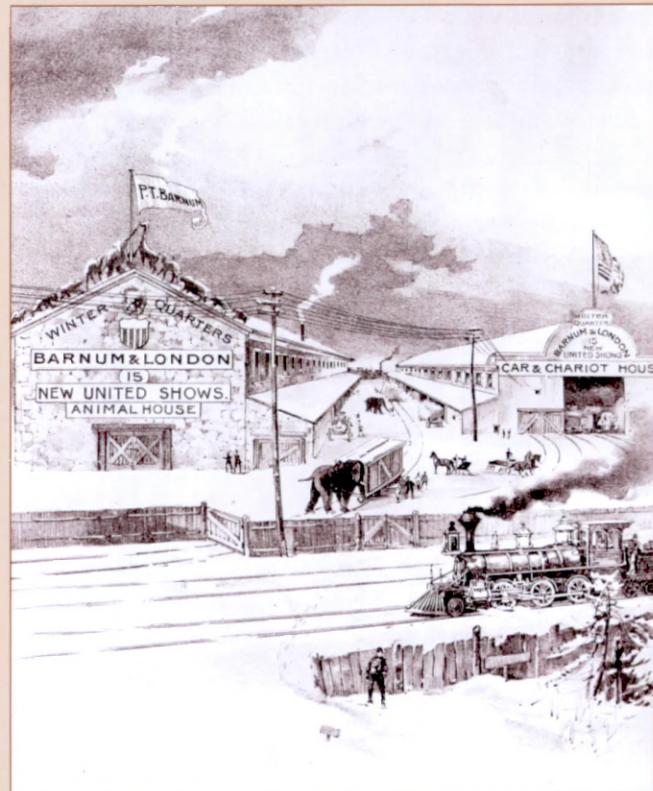
When the 1881 combination of the P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and James A. Bailey's Great London was facilitated through go-between James L. Hutchinson in mid-1880 it was accompanied by discussions of a fully integrated winter quarters. Since rival Adam Forepaugh had established a personally owned and consolidated winter quarters in Philadelphia, the new partners did not want to lack such an advantage.

Barnum's recommendation of a defunct factory facility and property in Bridgeport, Connecticut was accepted by his partners as the perfect location for the proposed winter quarters. Importantly, the site was close to New York City, the financial heart of corporate America, the city called home by James A. Bailey and a site close to where the circus would traditionally open each tour with an indoor engagement in Manhattan followed by the canvas debut in Brooklyn. Large profits with low transportation expenses early in the season front-loaded the tour to assure it would support the annual operating and capital budget requirements and the resultant wintering obligations. Barnum was a long-time resident and the biggest booster in Bridgeport's history. He realized that news of the circus would enhance the city's national standing. The men and women employed in preparing the circus for the annual tours infused money into local businesses, as did their securing of residential accommodations. As one can readily anticipate, the same perspective played the principal role when the circus left the frigid north for Florida in 1927.

Initially, the Bridgeport quarters was opened as a winter-time zoological attraction, with tickets sold for admission, though that aspect was eliminated in short order, for reasons unknown. A similar public access to the quarters would also become part of the essential vision of the Ringling-Barnum presence in Sarasota.

The only circus element not maintained in its entirety at the new Barnum show quarters in Bridgeport was the baggage stock, of which a portion went to farms elsewhere. This practice was replicated later, when Ringling-Barnum moved to Sarasota and had possession of the circus quarters in Peru, Indiana.

The Bridgeport winter quarters property belonged to the proprietors of the Greatest Show on Earth, remaining an asset through partnership changes in 1886 and 1888, and the death of Barnum in 1891. Bailey ceded his half interest in the real estate to the Barnum



*Barnum & Bailey Winter Quarters in Bridgeport, Connecticut.*  
Circus World Museum

heirs when he bought their share of the circus in 1894. Thereafter the Greatest Show on Earth and its purpose-built structures were only tenants of the property. The lease in effect at the time of Bailey's death in 1906 became part of the deal when the Ringling brothers bought the assets of Barnum & Bailey in 1907.

With the requisite infrastructure in place, a reasonable lease already signed and the location ideal for the New York opener, the Ringlings found it advantageous to retain Bridgeport as the winter quarters for their Barnum & Bailey unit. Shortly after taking possession of the eastern show, Otto Ringling re-negotiated the lease for the land. The last lease was signed in early 1924 and extended occupancy of the quarters through May 1928. John Ringling was well aware of the status of the lease on the Bridgeport quarters property, having been intimately involved in the management of Barnum & Bailey since late 1907. He relocated his private residence from Chicago to New York in 1910, placing himself closer to the action at winter quarters as well as other allied business activities in New York and Europe.

For some provincials, this magical overnight increase in their property values, while holding the mil rate constant, was cause for even more resentment against the Ringlings, as a result of the actions by their city administration.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar vein, *Billboard*, with an axe to grind on behalf of all traveling showmen, reported on October 19, 1919: "As far as can be learned the State authorities of Wisconsin have taxed the Ringling Brothers so heavily on their property in Baraboo that the brothers decided that inasmuch as the quarters at Bridgeport afforded ample shelter and convenience for both of their shows, their interests might probably be concentrated there." No formal announcement was ever made that a Ringling-owned circus would not return to Baraboo, but that is the way that the situation was eventually finalized; the big circus was gone, forever, it just never came home. It remained for the various family members to extract themselves from their local engagements.

The non-return of the Ringling show was the third circus departure from Baraboo in just four years. The Hodgini Bros. Combined Railroad Shows, an all but forgotten small railroad outfit, organized in the community by equestrian Al Hodgini, left in the spring and never came back.<sup>15</sup> The long established Gollmar Bros., a local fixture since 1891, was sold in 1916, the new owner taking possession at the end of the tour and routing it to his Paola, Kansas quarters.

### The Combined Shows

It fell upon the three remaining brothers, Alf T., Charlie, and John to determine the circus plan for 1919. The latter two really controlled the operations, Alf T. having been largely a management bystander for years. His declining health further limited his active participation. The governing duo chose to consolidate their two huge enterprises into a single one of 92 cars. The action was made known as early as the November 30, 1918 issue of *Billboard*, when the Ringling Bros.-Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows title appeared for the first time in print and a single troupe was confirmed. Formal public announcement did not come out of Bridgeport until March 20, 1919 long after both circuses had closed and reached the eastern quarters. That was only nine days before the annual Garden opener, so one assumes that the release was intended to spark interest in the Combined Shows debut.

Even though the flu epidemic had subsided and the Armistice had been signed in November 1918, the reality of American life was that two huge circus troupes were no longer viable. All outdoor amusements were in a decline. Although the masses had more money than ever before, recreational time and dollars were re-focused into motion picture palaces, dance establishments and other indoor pursuits, as well as the growing interest in professional sports. The brothers simply acknowledged reality and streamlined and downsized their operations accordingly. In hindsight,

their action proved prudent, especially if one looks at the charting of the number of circuses between 1905 and 1938, when the genre nearly died.

Just as Barnum & Bailey "belonged" to New York, the Ringling circus had been known as the "Chicago circus" following the inauguration of their annual opener at a refitted Tattersall's in 1895. While the Windy City engagement was highly remunerative, the New York Garden and other lucrative eastern dates were more so. The newly merged Ringling Bros., and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, which employed the Greatest Show on Earth slogan in lieu of World's Greatest Shows, would embrace the former Barnum & Bailey opening in Manhattan. Chicago was relegated to an extended engagement under canvas until the late 1950s. With this choice made, it was clear that Bridgeport had become the real home of the new Combined Shows. The expense of moving from the quarters to the Garden was minimal while the income was high, and early in the season, providing a quick payback on any investment. The revenues earned there were a substantial percentage of the season's total take and could reach 40% of the annual gross. Alf T. enjoyed the prosperity for one more tour, passing away in October 1919, his share going to his son Richard, and thereafter to his widow, daughter-in-law Aubrey.

### Succession

The two remaining Ringling brothers, John and Charlie, divided the great responsibilities of administering to the needs of Ringling-Barnum, the Big One, between themselves. The balance that they struck resulted in Charlie acting as overall general manager of the circus operation while John oversaw the winter quarters, routing and other off-premises activity. It was a wise split, made with each readily knowing the other's strengths.

Starting with the loss of Otto in 1911, the brothers increasingly delegated details of the work to their seasoned corps of veteran administrators and department heads. There was mutual allegiance and trust between employer and employee. In executing the merger of the two staffs the brothers had chosen between two equivalent staffers in some cases, but sometimes doubled up, or created assistant posts, to ease the transition from two to one mammoth circus. Those that didn't earn a permanent post at least had a transitional opportunity until finding a new job.

Within a few years the difficulties were resolved and by 1928 the show had grown marginally to a new maximum of 100 railroad cars, a benchmark number never achieved by any other single circus. That number sounded as good as the number of dollars of profit that the two brothers split with Richard Ringling, who'd inherited his father's 1/3 share in the circus and who did essentially nothing to contribute to its success. He was also kept away from involvement by his brothers, in like manner Charles's son Robert kept out of



John Ringling

Ringling Museum

the family trade. It didn't look as though there would be a second generation Ringling management.

Charlie Ringling died in December 1926 and his share in the profitable circus went to his widow, Edith. She envisioned her son, opera singer Robert Ringling, as eventually being in charge of the family's flagship enterprise. His cousin, Alf T. and Della's son Richard T. Ringling, was known for his reckless behavior and had failed miserably in taking out the quasi-motorized R. T. Richards Circus in 1917. There is an unconfirmed report in an early 1920s issue of *New Yorker* to the effect that Richard T. Ringling traveled with Ringling-Barnum whenever his uncles were not with it. Whether that was true or simply a means of spinning the family succession is unknown.

The sole survivorship of John and his strong desire to single-handedly assure the survival and thriving of Ringling-Barnum may have led to an increasing alienation from his brother's widow and son. So long as there was a strong positive cash flow into everyone's pockets, John rather imperially ruled the roost. John's ill-timed purchase of the Circus City Zoological Gardens, Inc., the former American Circus Corporation that owned five big shows and a couple winter quarters property, his "sharing" of the incurred debt with RBBB, and the onset of the Great Depression changed the entire situation. His kingly manner wore thin and the loss of dividends from the circus wore on his two female partners, who likely had little other income. They sought the confidence of circus attorney John M. Kelley, who transformed their alienation into a legal and corporate action that had real teeth. The enmity that came to exist is palpable in a document that Kelley prepared, one that confirmed his conflict of interest as the Ringlings' attorney and earned him the sobriquet of "traitor" in the eyes of John Ringling and his nephew Henry North.

#### Circus in Transition

Subsequent to the passage of the Interstate Commerce Act, each winter representatives of the major circuses gathered in New York and via a binding action divided and assigned sections of the nation and routes to each of the shows. This trust-like "Circus Congress" activity and other non-compete agreements signed by two or more traveling shows was alleged to be taken in the interest of the public as the high cost of advertising, as much as a third of the annual operating budget, would thereby be reduced. Not surprisingly, there was no retrenchment in circus ticket prices, but retained profits did advance.

The collaborative partitioning effort collapsed, likely because of the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 and the Panic of 1893, but non-compete agreements continued to be negotiated and signed, especially between the biggest shows. Following the 1906 death of Bailey, a renewal of regional partitioning efforts fell principally upon the shoulders of

## Circuses Look South

At the start of this paper, an opinion was offered that the selection of Bridgeport as the quarters for the Combined Shows between 1918 and 1927 was a continuation of the prevalent “winter in the North” mentality. It is time to enhance that observation.

Plotting circus winter quarters locations between the origin of the traveling circus in 1825 and the advent of rail travel in the 1870s yields a corridor of cities that stretches from New England westward to the Mississippi, and from south of the Canadian border to north of the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River. It was the portion of the United States that was most heavily developed and where the circus proprietor was most likely to secure the desired return on his investment.

There were some outsiders to this area, notably St. Louis and New Orleans, which were facilitated by their size and access by steamboat, but such remote locations were not profuse in numbers or sustainability. One should also bear in mind that it was not common practice for a circus to always winter. Some shows took a break where it was convenient or economical and then went back on the road after a layoff of just a few weeks. Formal winter quarters facilities were not common until after the Civil War, when higher capital investment and accompanying expenses could be sustained and thereby facilitate a longer preparatory period. One needs to understand a premise; if a circus wasn't touring, it was losing money.

Early amphitheater and pavilion shows toured the south, but it did not develop as quickly as the northeast quadrant of the country into a strong base of circus operations. The rise of the South as a haven for circus visitation and wintering activity was stalled by several principal factors. The agrarian economy of the South and its lower population density proved less profitable

than engagements in the North and Midwest. Shows sometimes reduced their size to adjust for the lower expected attendance. Roads were passable to dead axle wagons and multiple teams that could navigate muddy, rutted roads and overland terrain. The broad gauge railroad operations were maintained in extensive areas of the south even after most roads converted to the standard gauge in 1886. These travel circumstances made every trip into the South more arduous and thereby less profitable.

There were natural dangers, too, like the crocodiles that made off with a camel and a horse from the 1870 John Robinson show in the Florida swamps.<sup>16</sup> The economic ravages of the Civil War and lingering animosity towards carpetbaggers and Northerners in general kept most big shows away. The South also had a reputation for violence, claiming more showmen's lives than any other portion of the country. Yet, the search for prime territory and good revenues meant that a number of railroad shows plunged into the South, even before it had a unified railroad track gauge.

The top heavy Howes outfit moved by rails through the South in the late 1870s but also met its demise there. Forepaugh did a deep penetrating tour in 1881, but his 1882 route took him barely into the northern edge of the South, the results of the two years forever after keeping him away. The Barnum show never went below the Mason-Dixon Line until 1886, reportedly because of economic factors. There may also have been memory of Barnum's strong advocacy for the abolition of slavery, standing in contrast to James A. Bailey, who didn't hire black workingmen until 1905, then being compelled by a strike to do so. Bailey, himself, out of show ownership from 1885 until late 1887, never took the Barnum show into the south until 1890.

John Ringling and W. W. Cole (representing Barnum & Bailey) and agents from other shows, their cooperative agreements achieved through meetings in New York.

Though reduced by the deaths of four brothers to just three by the end of 1918, the remaining Ringlings were able to cope largely because John was in New York and could overlook Bridgeport, while Charlie was in Chicago and could keep Baraboo in line, both being assisted by cadres of able lieutenants. They had earned mastery of the traveling show world by their superior numbers and dogged tenacity, as well as by supremely good fortune. But, the world was not static and moved ahead in ways that dramatically lim-

ited the future for the traveling circus that even the mighty Ringling brothers could not overcome.

In our opinion, the American tented circus experienced its zenith in the generation between 1872 and 1890, dates derived from the advent of the complete railroad circus traveling on its own train to the introduction of the giant spectacle. These two landmarks define the parameters of quantity and quality achieved by the genre. Inertia carried it on, the greatest number of troupes achieved in 1905 at about 100, and the individual troupe size and splendor pinnacles reached in 1928 (and via post-WWII prosperity in 1947).

But, make no mistake, after 1905 the circus was in a bat-

tle for survival against the newer forms of entertainment; vaudeville; motion pictures; amusement parks; fairs with carnivals; and professional sports. Competition from outside the circus business was the principal challenge that the brothers faced as they captained the flagships of the outdoor show business through the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the long term, it was a losing battle, no one being able to control the vectoring of American culture and entertainment. The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a boom time for popular amusements, all of which battled the circus for the available disposable dollars.

Life in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America was characterized by increased wages and fewer working hours. It meant that citizens enjoyed greater periods of leisure time and disposable income to spend in pursuit of recreation.

Variety stage and vaudeville houses had always been a threat to the circus, even in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, but especially after the formation of the chains with their better working conditions, higher wages and two-year contracts siphoned off star performers.

The modern, enclosed amusement park business was inaugurated in Chicago in 1894 and blossomed, as had the circus in the 1870s, following the incomparable and brilliantly-illuminated financial success of Luna Park at Coney Island in 1903. The business boomed for a generation.

The traveling carnival business achieved a recognizable format and formula in 1899 and it benefited from the proliferation of street fairs and BPOE event sponsorships, akin to those that the Shrine started with indoor circuses in 1905. Even the traveling Wild West, a derivation of the circus and rightly studied as part of it, competed with it for audience dollars. Originated in 1883, it reached its peak of popularity in the years between 1910 and 1914.

The movie business also took off like a rocket during the late 1890s and early 1900s. It would eventually outpace most other entertainment forms, comfortably holding sway until the advent of television in the 1950s kept everyone at home.

### Circus Visits to Florida

It is convenient at this time to temporarily suspend discussion of the frigid North and the railroad circus for a snowbird's excursion to the sunny South and to provide insights into the development of Florida's circus heritage. There was a long series of events via which the state came to be a personal retreat for circus people, as well as a temporary home for touring shows and a fertile launching pad for circuses. Decades later, almost overnight, Sarasota achieved a status that cannot be equaled by any other community that seeks the mantle of the "Circus City."

A span of 95 years passed between the first visit by a circus to the Sunshine State in 1833 and the time when the Ringling show relocated its home to Sarasota in the fall of

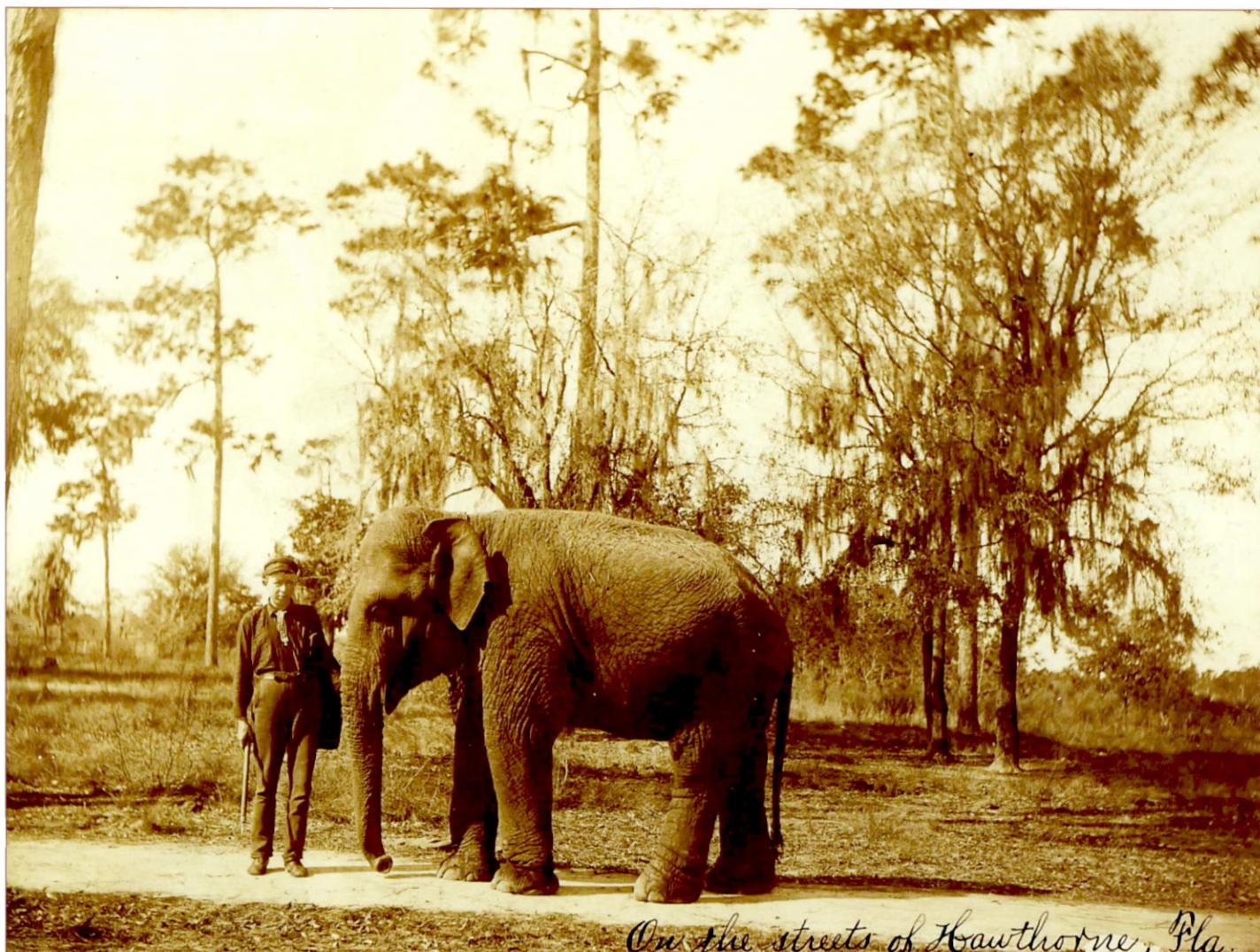
1927. The entire population of the state of Florida was hardly 35,000 when the first ring was erected for the rider, clown and ringmaster. When the Ringling-Barnum eight-pole big top came home for the first time to Sarasota, the state's population was approaching the million and a half mark. You will recall that figure as being the nominal resident population of Wisconsin when the Ringling circus was founded there in 1884, both states also having about the same land area of approximately 54,300 square miles.

Just as the Mabies had gone west to enhance their show prospects in a developing area, so did others reach south to Florida, which was also developing in the period between 1881 and 1926. By 1927 Florida had experienced a land boom bubble, as well as the obligatory bust, both of which also are important parts of the Ringling relocation story line.

The adoption of movable tent operation in 1825 made the majority of the American circus troupes' seasonal affairs dependent upon good weather, navigable roads and willing citizens to facilitate a successful tour. With a six and later a seven-day per week regimen, circus people essentially had no personal spring, summer or fall leisure time. If they were lucky and didn't make a Sunday run, there might be one day per week to pursue life's other pleasures. These included: attending church; catching up on sleeping and rest; doing the washing or taking a leisurely bath; or enjoying a local tour, a movie or some fishing if their chores were all done. Winter, to a showman, often meant indoor bookings, an alternative job, act practice or preparations for the next summer. Hard-working traveling showmen needed some appropriate relaxation and returning home to a barren and chilled winter landscape hardly suited the bill.

Yet, the traditional economics and mind-set of the proprietors provided little opportunity for any humanitarian respite. To some degree, the migration of shows south was delayed by the slow development of the state's commerce and transportation facilities. A few larger cities along the coasts thrived because of their port trade, but the interior lands lagged far behind until accessed by the railroads. The state continues even today to attract major developments, with the massive Walt Disney World installation, initiated near Orlando in 1964, suggestive of just how much opportunity remained for entrepreneurial activity at even that late date. For our story, it was the Gulf Coast shoreline, having been bypassed by the railroads and therefore less well developed than the Atlantic coast, which principally beckoned showmen and led to its rise as a haven for their activities.

Despite the fixation on remaining in northern winter quarters, showmen had realized very early that the southern states offered a hospitable late fall climate and importantly provided opportunity for winter tours and shows. They were essentially, in terms of today's vocabulary, "snowbird" operations.



An elephant from a circus showing in Hawthorne, Florida.

*On the streets of Hawthorne, Fla.*

Author's collection

It was the norm, rather than the exception, for 19<sup>th</sup> century overland circuses to tour on a nearly year-round basis as there was little need to enter winter quarters for repair and practice. The capital equipment was minimal, maintained en route, and if the owner desired a new performance agenda it was accomplished by turning over the cast from one day to the next. A layover in a convenient, economical and welcoming community, where the local income was enriched by the presence of the touring troupe staff, cast and crew, could last from just a few days to perhaps a month, dependent upon the plan of the proprietor.

The first circus to reach Florida, Sizer's, visited in December 1833. That was a decade before S. H. Nichols routed his troupe from Illinois north across the border into Wisconsin. The next to reach the Sunshine State, Benchley & Stone's Lafayette circus, was there in January 1839 and James Raymond's troupe arrived in January 1840.

Florida is usually extremely hot in the summer and that leaves us wondering why Delavan, Wisconsin-based Harry Buckley did so during the middle of 1859. A pioneer in his

methods, Buckley was the first showman to organize a new circus in Delavan and was the earliest of several notable Wisconsin-affiliated showmen who would tour, visit, reside or relocate to Florida during the next 150 years. He may have been ignorant of the blistering sunlight and heat before undertaking his June 1859 visit to Florida, but he returned in October and departed from Key West in December for the West Indies. Buckley's extended presence accrued multiple "first" achievements. His was the first circus to: brave Florida's mid-summer heat; the first to play Jacksonville and other Atlantic coast communities; the first to navigate an overland route west from Jacksonville to Tallahassee; the first show that played the state at two different times during a single season's tour; and was perhaps the first overland show to use the state as the inauguration point for another country.

Subsequent to the conclusion of the Civil War and a partial recovery of the South's economy, showmen again eyed it with an eye for new territory. The Great Eastern circus, one of the new style railroad shows inaugurated in 1872, was



George W. "Pop Corn" Hall

Circus World Museum

the first to penetrate all the way south to Florida in that important season, returning again in 1873. The John Robinson show, another Cincinnati-based outfit that had prior railroading experience followed the Great Eastern into Florida in December 1872.

Adam Forepaugh was one of the few really big shows that even tested the South, dropping into Florida for a single date at Pensacola in late 1881. His advance car was fitted with adjustable gauge axles, but exactly how the remainder of the circus was outfitted for passage on multiple gauges remains a challenging puzzle.

Given that the big shows sought higher profits elsewhere, smaller railroad shows found the area south of the Mason-Dixon Line and the Ohio River a haven from these more powerful competitors. The situation explains the continuing presence of small railroad shows, known as "tramp shows," their travels likened to those opportunistic individ-

uals of the road who moved about without a fixed plan or goal. These outfits often rolled between dates on a motley train of their own cars, or others. At times they leased from the local railroad, thereby side-stepping the issue of different gauges that stalled the advance of the big show-owned trains into the territory. They were harbingers of the small shows that could risk doing a route in the state, having a lower daily expense than the big rail outfits.

Capable and enduring Wisconsin showman, George W. "Pop Corn" Hall visited Florida with his small outfit in 1884. The R. W. Weldon & Co.'s Shows, a red hot enterprise enveloped entirely with graft, hit the state in early 1885 and caused such havoc that the state comptroller ordered all their licenses to exhibit be withdrawn. Forepaugh & Samwells, another modest-sized railer, hit the state in January 1887. King & Franklin was in Florida in late 1891 and W. H. Harris routed his Chicago-based show into the state in early 1894.

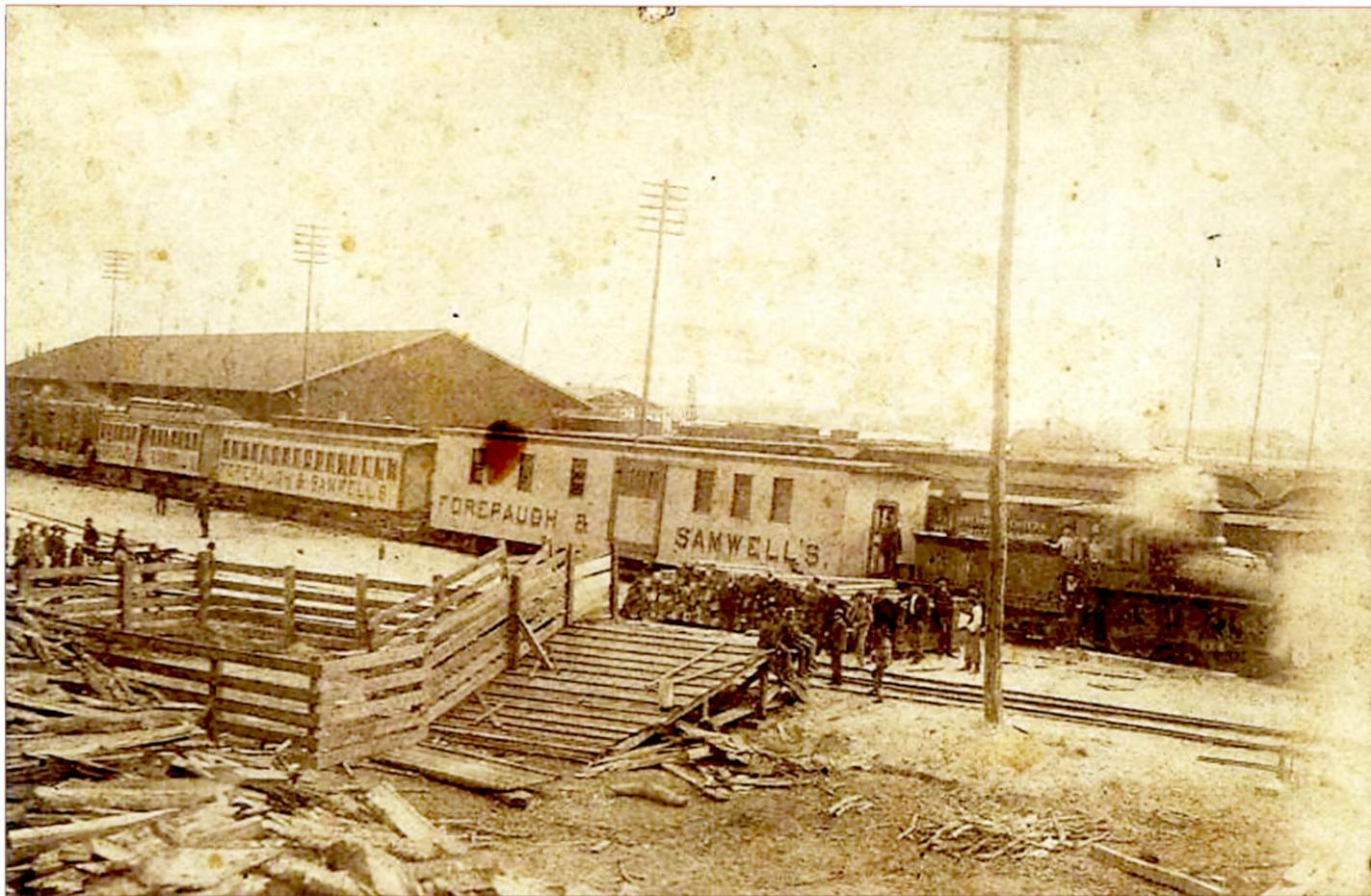
Where the whales feared to swim the minnows swallowed. Shields's Ten Cent Circus was at Jacksonville and Fernandina in January 1889, followed by Bingley & Co., another dime-sized concern. In January 1890 the state was said to be overrun with ten cent circuses. One of these was Heffron's Great Eastern Circus, which did a date at Tampa.

Florida's era of big railroad show operations finally commenced with Ben Wallace, who routed his near 30-car Great Wallace Shows into the state at the end of the 1897 season. He closed out an extended tour at Gainesville, Florida on January 7, 1898, the only visit to the Sunshine State at any time by his circus. It was a probing engagement, as were all the others that followed into the 1920s.

The biggest show arrivals didn't happen until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. James A. Bailey dispatched his 59-car Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Enormous Shows United into Pensacola for a date on October 15, 1904. The huge 77-car Ringling Bros. outfit rolled into Jacksonville on November 15, 1905. Then the Bailey estate-managed Barnum & Bailey outfit played the same city on November 2, 1906. These three leading troupes fulfilled just six more engagements in Florida through 1918. The limited number of dates indicates that wise showmen judged the prospects for straw houses to be pretty marginal.

While the biggest troupes hardly dangled their toes into the state, more modest railroad shows continued to roll into the state on a consistent, if somewhat an infrequent basis, as they sought new revenue sources. J. R. W. Hennessey opened his Cooper & Co. United Railroad Shows at Key West on February 5, 1900. Rhoda Royal had his four-car rig in Florida at the end of 1900 and into 1901. Charlie Sparks initiated winter visitations in the state in the winter of 1900, returning in every January thereafter to 1909, except 1902 and 1908.

W. H. Harris routed back into the state in early 1903 and



An 1887 photograph of the Forepaugh & Samwells circus train cars in Jacksonville, Florida.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

returned in March 1904 to Manatee. Elmer H. Jones brought the two-car Cole & Rogers into Florida about 1906 and followed it with his two-car King & Tucker Big City Shows in Bradenton (now Bradenton) in January 1909. The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also included visits by: Howes Great London; Orton; M. L. Clark; Sun Bros.; and Great Van Amburg. These were followed in the second decade by: Sparks; Cole & Rice; J. H. Eschman; Gentry Bros.; and Sig Sautelle, among others. Rhoda Royal rolled across the state line in 1920, with John Robinson in 1923, Sells-Floto in 1924 and Sparks doing engagements that year, and again in 1926. The latter year included a booking of the Bob Morton Circus, under the auspices of the Ku Klux Klan.

Clearly, in the years before RBBB relocated to Florida the state was becoming less and less a frontier for circus operations. Many showmen hoped that their date would be the first really big straw house in the sun.

#### Showmen in Florida

Florida slowly accumulated a heritage as the birthplace, vacation destination, life residence or retirement home for a number of showmen. Their presence didn't necessarily cause more circus activity to become resident in the state, but it

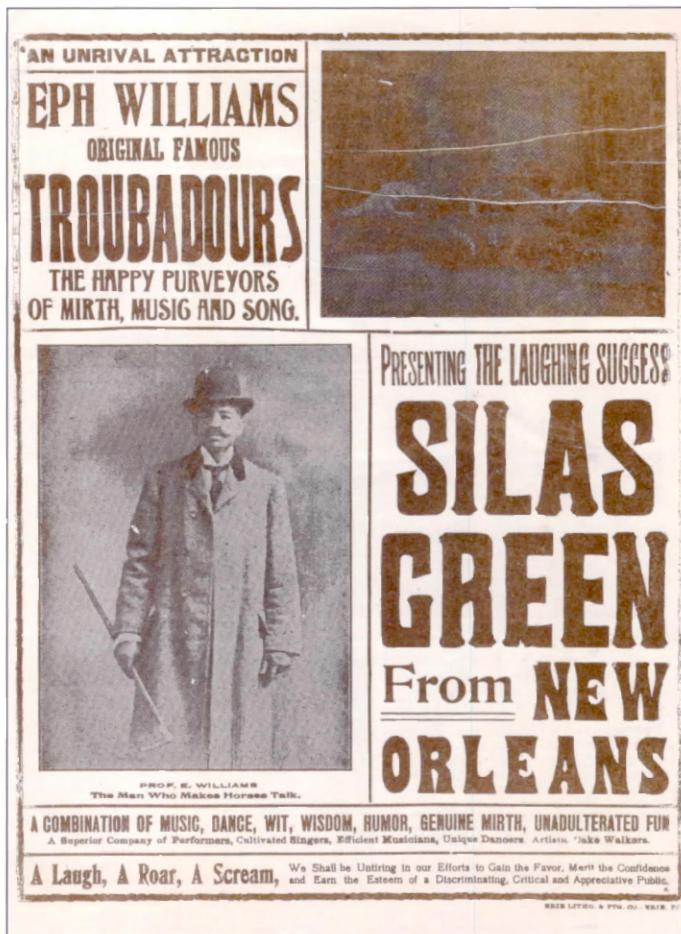
did serve to spread knowledge about the climate, economy and travel possibilities within the traveling fraternity. People are more likely to talk with a greater number of family and friends about where they've been, as opposed to where they reside.

The current knowledge of show folks presence is largely anecdotal, but the known examples reflect an increasing knowledge of Floridian opportunity. Most gravitated to the well-developed and larger coastal cities that could be accessed by conventional transportation, railroads and coastal steamships.

Addison M. Nathans, the younger brother of John J. Nathans, a partner in Barnum's from 1876 to 1880, was, to the best of our knowledge, the first native-born circus man of note from Florida. His birth occurred there on December 27, 1835, under unknown circumstances.

Noted leaper William H. Batcheller married Pauline V. Jenkins, who was known in the trade as La Belle Pauline. Their nuptials were conducted on January 3, 1876 in Pensacola, Florida.

P. T. Barnum took a trip to Florida during the winter of 1880-1881, anticipating that the initial tour of the world's first three-ring circus would require him to be in top physi-



Ephraim Williams on a herald for the Silas Green Minstrels.  
Circus World Museum

cal condition. The seventy-year old guy was good for another decade after his rejuvenating trip.

William C. Crum, the nephew of Dan Rice who may have been the writer that coined the phrase "The Greatest Show on Earth," retired from the circus business and bought an inland Florida orange grove by 1882. He'd have remained the first circus "retiree" in the state if the big frost of 1886 hadn't destroyed his investment. His uncle, Dan Rice was revived in mind and spirit by a visit that he made to Crum's place in January 1884. Alvido, the Japanese juggler with the Wallace show, spent the winter of 1890 in the state.

Superlative Australian-born equestrian Frank J. Melville and his all-around performing wife, Louise Boshell, may have been the first performers to have established and maintained a Florida residence. They did so in St. Augustine, while still actively riding in the ring. The action likely took place sometime after they returned from a six-year triumphal tour of European and Russian circuses in March 1890.

Fanny Victoria Scafari, a performer, and her husband, Alexei Scafari, a Russian equestrian, established a residence in Florida in 1892, after they visited the state in 1888 with the Bingley circus. She passed away in Tampa in 1896.

The Parson family of Darlington, Wisconsin, which grew rich on managing the Ringling show concessions for over two decades, established Florida residency immediately after being discharged from the circus in 1908. They never worked another day.

Ephraim Williams was out of the circus business after 1902 and went on to make his fortune with the Silas Green minstrel show. Exactly how early Wisconsin's pioneer black circus owner established his lower Florida residence and where it was sited have yet to be determined. He passed away there in 1921.

For some show folks, their presence in Florida was the closing stand in life. Barnum show fat lady Rosina Delight Wood happened to be in Florida when complications from her over quarter-ton heft precipitated her death in 1878. Acrobat William R. "Bibb" Forepaugh, Adam Forepaugh's nephew and patriarch of a family of performers died in Tampa in 1897, as the result of injuries sustained in a local railroad mishap. His father, Adam's older brother, manager John A. Forepaugh, also reportedly met his end in Florida in 1906. Rider and proprietor Miles Orton passed away in Key West in 1903 and was interred in Tallahassee. They were followed by: Wild West owner C. W. Riggs (1917, Tampa); famed circus man John F. Robinson (1921, Miami); Nick Norton, performer and manager (1921, St. Petersburg); agent and owner W. E. Franklin (1926, St. Petersburg); and equestrian Robert T. Stickney (1928, Miami).

In the years after the relocation of the Ringling show there would be more showmen there than in any other state, with the possible exception of Indiana. This was the result of the American Circus Corporation being in Peru, IN, as well as the legacy of other shows that had been founded or wintered in the Hoosier State.

#### Opening Days, Winter Quarters and Animal Compounds in Florida

Circus winter layovers and season starts in Florida commenced by the 1890s. They were the actions of transient showmen, men of opportunity who seldom started a new annual tour twice in the same community.

John Henry Shields' 55-year career in the circus business was highlighted by his ten-cent circus operation in the 1880s. The Great Southern Show that he opened in Jacksonville on January 2, 1890 is thought to be the first to have been wintered and re-opened in the state of Florida. They sailed out of the harbor to Key West for a three week date.

An all but forgotten troupe, Miller, Austin & Robinson's Combined Show, was seeking railroad equipment, performers of all sorts and known manager C. W. Kidder as they closed out their 1892 tour in Mexico. They planned a New Year's Day opening at Key West, but whether it took place as envisioned is unknown. The proprietor may have been someone named E. Marron.

Wisconsin's adopted son, Hoosier-born W. C. Coup, mainstay of the Barnum show between 1871 and 1875, organized the Coup-Dice Circus in Florida in 1894, possibly the first circus actually assembled in the state. At the time of his passing in Jacksonville, on March 4, 1895, he was touring with the Coup, Cooper & Co. Circus.

"Pop Corn George" Hall toured his circus in Florida briefly in 1884 and closed at Tampa with the Hall & McFlinn show in early 1892. He returned two years later and in January 1894 purchased and established a winter quarters on two acres of land near the city. It was likely the first such site in the state's history and supported the show opening in Tampa on February 15.

Charlie Sparks, one of the greatest showmen in American circus history, often minimized his off-road time, but during most winters between 1900 and 1909 he spent time traveling and laying over in Florida.

At the opposite end of the honesty scale from Sparks were Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers. These grifters wintered their Howes Great London Shows at Jacksonville from late 1909 into 1910. They enlisted the local Shrine temple as their sponsor for their twelve day long extended opener in the last year.

They are outside the domain of the circus, but exotic animal facilities and carnivals also found Florida to be a welcome escape from life on the road. The state sourced live alligators to showmen by the 1890s and hosted ostrich farms



W. C. Coup

Circus World Museum



Mrs. Charles Sparks and Mrs. Bert Cole in carriage in Fernandina, Florida.

Author's collection



*The famous Ringling family portrait, likely an image made by Trimpey Studios of Baraboo about 1895. Standing (left to right): Albert, Alf. T., Gus, Charles, and Otto. Seated (left to right): John, Salome, August, Ida, and Henry. It is the only known sitting of the entire family.*

Ringling Museum

to supply feathers for flamboyant women's hats.

Pennsylvania-born carnival sheik Johnny J. Jones readily recognized the attributes of a warm wintering site and established winter quarters in Florida in 1907, occupying a site in Orlando two decades before a talking mouse popped into the imagination of a budding cartoonist and theme park visionary. Gibsonton, known familiarly as "Gibtown," lying placidly between Sarasota and Tampa, became a rest haven for carnival people a few years before John Ringling enriched Sarasota with his contributions. The community remains the heart of that business today, with the International Independent Showmens Foundation site hosting a huge trade fair each February.

One of the most surprising discoveries in researching the Florida saga was learning that John Ringling was not the first circus man to cast his eyes upon the keys off Sarasota. James A. Bailey proposed to purchase them and establish

upon the land and adjacent waters a breeding colony for all sorts of wild and exotic animals, including the indigenous and endangered manatee. His early 1890s proposal was likely sparked by difficulties and exceptional expenses associated with obtaining animals from European agents.

Bailey's vision never reached fruition, nor did two similar proposals floated by the Ringlings, but a similar plan for an offshore Victorian-era equivalent to the present day Disney animal operation was also proposed by the Ringling interests at two different times within the next decade and a half.

Florida long served as a source for reptiles and serpents that were presented in side shows, but the closest that the keys came to being an animal sanctuary occurred in 1928-1929, when Ringling-Barnum installed a shoreline corral at the site of today's causeway to serve as the temporary home for Goliath, the show's featured sea elephant.

## The Ringling Family Comes to Florida

With this foundational activity in mind, we're now ready to delineate the Ringling residency shift and the sequence of events that culminated with the arrival of the Ringling-Barnum circus at Sarasota at the conclusion of the 1927 tour.

The earliest connection between the Ringlings and Florida was an unusual announcement from January 1894. The promoters of the Corbett-Mitchell prize fight, to be staged near Jacksonville, contacted the Ringling show with the intent to rent their big top canvas to house the event. For reasons not stated, the brothers declined to participate in the undertaking.

The next Florida connection also failed to materialize. Father August Ringling, the family patriarch had been ill for some time. It was thought that a change from Wisconsin's blustery winter to the sunshine of Florida might offer some hope for his recovery. The early 1898 announcement of the proposed trip confirms that the family had knowledge of the state and its attractive climate long before they adopted it as their home. A trip was planned whereby August, wife Salome, daughter Ida and son Otto would all journey south. A temporary health improvement and perhaps the dread of a long railroad trip to unfamiliar territory caused the travel plans to be placed on hold. Less than a month later, on August 16, August Ringling passed away, having never enjoyed the winter respite offered by the Sunshine State.

Several of the Ringling brothers finally reached Florida in 1905, after John made the decision to route their World's Greatest Shows into Jacksonville for a one-day engagement on November 15. As per typical practice, he probably traveled ahead to scout out the Seaboard or Southern Railroad, which transported the show from Waycross, Georgia into Jacksonville, and then back north to Valdosta. Traveling in style in his new Pullman-built private railroad car, the *Wisconsin*, the second of the same name, Ringling may have checked out the local rail yards and business conditions before signing the date, each being important for the success of the engagement. Gus Ringling likely rolled into Jacksonville on the No. 1 Ringling advance car in October, spending the day overseeing his crew's operations. Presumably he called upon the local newspaper editors to personally represent the circus bearing his family's name, thereby making a far greater impression than any hired agent. Charles Ringling was definitely with the circus, serving as general manager when it arrived in Jacksonville on Circus Day. His departure from Baraboo for Florida to join the circus was noted in the hometown newspaper. Al, Otto and Henry were also with the circus, fulfilling their normal duties when it played Jacksonville. Six of seven brothers had all crossed the state line into Florida within a matter of weeks because of their circus.

Perhaps to experience what his six siblings later described at the 1905 family holiday gathering, it was Alf T. Ringling, wife Della, their son Richard and a Miss Alva Johnson who were the first Ringlings to visit Florida for recreational purposes. The quartet spent several weeks in Tampa from mid to late-December 1906, the extended break causing mother Ringling to reschedule the annual family Christmas dinner until after her grandson had returned.

It is unknown if Alf T.'s party remained in Tampa proper or if they ventured into the vicinity of Tarpon Springs, where John and Mable would first acquaint themselves with the local conditions two years later, during the winter of 1906-1907.

One can imagine that there was much postponed Christmas dinner table talk about the Alf T. family's Florida escapade. Unfortunately, the happiness of the shared gathering and the convivial conversation of January 27 escaped without a moment's notice. Mother Ringling quietly slipped away from this life while in the arms of Lou Ringling as the rest of the family cleared the table and did the dishes. Her passing marked the end of the annual family holiday dinners in Baraboo. One door closed that night, but the framework for another was already in the air.

## Statehood to Charlie Thompson and Friends

The specific path by which John Ringling became a major land baron in Sarasota started when Florida achieved statehood in 1845. Through the subsequent 66 years a number of connected events took place that impacted how the Gulf Coast community would be developed. Essential and critical parts of the saga were related in Karl Grismer's history of the city, *The Story of Sarasota* (1946), which can be verified and supplemented in many other resources that have subsequently become available in the digital era.

The land that included Sarasota and the surrounding settlements was held by the State of Florida's Internal Improvement Fund through 1881. At that time about four million acres were sold to Hamilton Disston of Philadelphia, scion of the saw-making family, making him the greatest land owner in the U. S. The price was about a quarter per acre. An English syndicate titled the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company purchased 50,000 acres from Disston and appointed a young man, J. Hamilton Gillespie, to oversee the homesteading of the area. The project turned out to be one of the early Florida land frauds when the first settlers arrived in 1885. Fortunately, Gillespie was a good guy, remaining in the area and undertaking the building of the DeSoto Hotel and other amenities that could support vacationers seeking recreational tarpon fishing.

The Gulf Coast area attracted the interest of New Englanders who sought a winter retreat and escape from their harsh winters. A Boston barrister, Harvey N. Shepard, vacationed in the De Soto during several winters, pursuing the

## A Showman's Interlude

Shortly before their family dinner, the Ringlings and other American showmen were treated to a couple articles that a young circus press agent named Jimmy DeWolfe wrote about the carefree winter life on Sarasota bay. His Floridian host was a former colleague on the Sells and other shows, Charlie Thompson, a highly regarded circus man.

The first of the Florida fluff pieces appeared in the January 19, 1907 issue of *Billboard*, with another appearing in the following issue and the third on March 16. The segments included photos of the pair fishing and lounging under a lemon tree, as well as their portraits.

DeWolfe's breezy jottings, under the title of "Sandy and Me, Sense and Nonsense of Two Tent Showmen on Vacation," portrayed a true life of Riley. Thompson and DeWolfe, from Columbus, Ohio, cut jackpots and fixed life's ills while fishing off a sun-baked wooden pier. They leisurely killed the hours basking in the warm sun while most of their readers shivered in the frozen North.

The illustrated description surely resonated with the Ringling brothers, being coincident with the observations provided by Alf T.'s family. To understand where this leads, we have to back up a bit and catch the thread that leads to Thompson being in Sarasota.



### Being Further Sayings and Doings of Tent Show Men on a Vacation.

The header of the "Sandy and Me" article published in *Billboard* January 26, 1907.

Circus World Museum

recreational fishing and hunting that was abundantly available. He came to know Gillespie and invested in the real estate that was readily sold in large chunks. Sarasota was then approachable only by water, there being no overland access.

Shepard went home in April 1890 and crowed about the beautiful location, so taken with it that Gillespie, Shepard, and twenty associates invested in the Manatee & Sarasota Railway and Drainage Company, locally known as the "Slow & Wobbly." It was organized to construct a railroad to the rural enclave, facilitating access to the abundant natural beauty of the area and thereby raise property values through further development. Their ambitious effort stalled after only nine miles of track were constructed.

The element of the Shepard episode that seems to resonate through much of John Ringling's life and his evolving connection with Sarasota is railroads. The men who were involved with America's greatest industry at the turn of the century seem to have been of a similar mind, building, expanding, investing, developing and serving, all while making a profit in the name of capitalism. John's extensive involvement with railroads started with contracting show train moves; then he moved to the nation's rail hub, Chicago in the 1890s; he bought used Pullman cars, second-hand locomotives and freight cars; and eventually became the proprietor of several short or branch line operations. Through all of this activity, John came to feel a true kinship with other railroaders, augmenting and extending his already broad base of American commerce engendered by his extensive travels on behalf of the Ringling circus.

The next snowbird in the Sarasota sequence was Dr. Frederick H. Williams of Bristol, Connecticut, who had been in the area as early as 1885. During his May 1891 visit he examined over fifty miles of shoreline and bought a 267-acre plot about two miles north of Sarasota. The price he paid reflected a 1250% increase in the value of the Shepard land in a single year.

Williams was accompanied on one of his visitations by a Bristol area farmer, who was elected to serve as a Selectman in the community, Henry C. Butler. One source identifies him as a sheriff. They and others from their hometown were eventually considered the founders of the community that Williams named Indian Beach. They platted the parcel and had it recorded locally in October 1891.

By February 1892, Butler commenced extensive improvements to his personal plot, including the construction of a two-story, twelve room cottage to house two families on the bay. Delays in material receipt pushed back completion until the spring of 1893. In June of that year the local newspaper published a feature story about the numerous storefront developments that were established in Manatee County.

Northern investment in Gulf real estate was well under-



**C. N. THOMPSON,  
Manager.**

*Charles Thompson from the 1906 Hagenbeck Route Book.*  
Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

way, attracted by the protective shoals and keys that created navigable waterways, beautiful vistas and bountiful fish. An unidentified investor from Chicago, characterized only as a wealthy merchant, was the first from that area to buy in the Sarasota area in mid-1894.

Circuses and politicians have long been in concert and conflict. It was a positive relationship that transpired between Butler and Charles N. Thompson, a staffer with the Adam Forepaugh circus when it entertained the residents of Bristol on May 5, 1894. Their talk turned to what Butler characterized as "real living," spending the winter at his Gulf shore property north of Sarasota.

Charles N. Thompson was a cut above the typical showman. Born in Marseilles, Illinois in 1856, he joined the red wagons in 1881 and remained in the business until he died in 1918. His employers were a roll call of industry leaders: Burr Robbins; the Sells brothers; W. W. Cole; Adam Forepaugh; James A. Bailey; Ben Wallace; Pawnee Bill; and at the end, the Ringling brothers. His career pinnacle was the management of the Carl Hagenbeck Trained Wild Animal Show in 1906. He was universally regarded as one of the top adjusters in the tented world, readily able to resolve any hot button issues that arose between a circus and local individu-

als. It was suitable training for someone who stepped in and filled the role of general manager of a large railroad circus. Our research has revealed nothing but laudatory compliments about both his character and work.

The Thompson couple had already considered heading south for the winter. Butler's praise for Florida resulted in the showman and his wife journeying to Tampa that winter. In the company of agent George N. Benjamin, they hired a cat boat and set off for Sarasota, docking at Butler's wharf. They stayed the night with him and on the next day immediately purchased the Anna M. Clark property, a 154-acre site with a mile of beach front. It was situated north of Indian Beach and south of the Bristol enclave. The deal was sealed on March 26. The first circus man to come to Sarasota staked out his property.

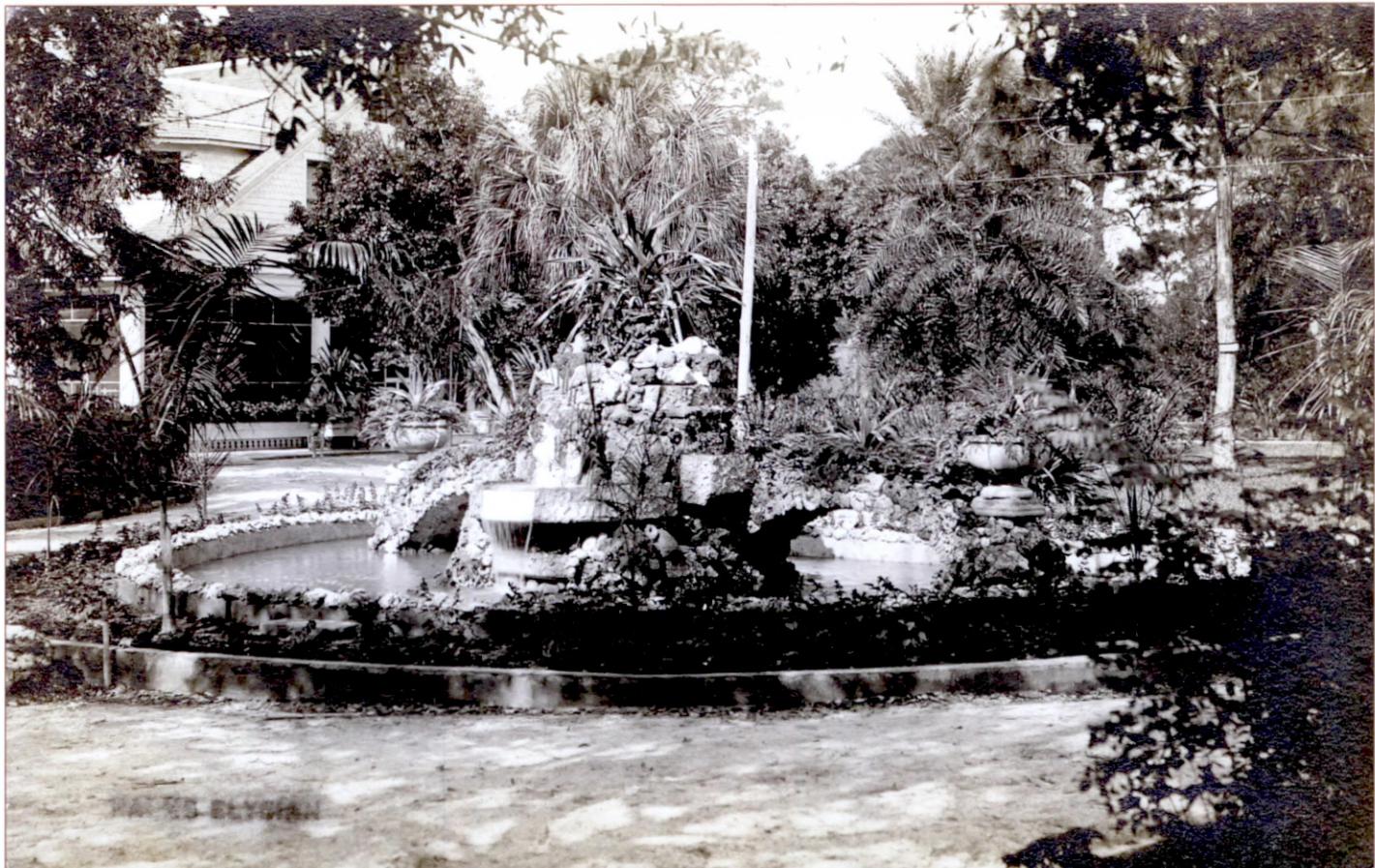
Thompson paid \$1,550 for the plot and later added another 30 acres to it. Reportedly he represented a syndicate of nine people with the avowed intent to build winter residences. Without delay, Thompson set about clearing the land, dividing it into 100-foot wide parcels and ordering materials for home construction. His improvements made the area, platted in 1895 as Shell Beach, prime real estate for additional residential construction.

The Thompsons came back to Sarasota for the winter of 1895-1896 and proceeded to erect a conventional frame home, a simple but spacious two-story bungalow. By January 1896 his home was built, a small cottage was underway and he could walk out on a pier that extended 1000 feet into the bay.

One of the immediate land buyers was a circus friend of Thompson's, William H. English, and his spouse, Mary C. English. Both English and Thompson labored for the Sells Bros., made the 1892 Australian excursion with that outfit and then moved on to the Great Wallace Shows of Peru, Indiana. Like others that came south, English bought more property than was necessary for his own needs and sold a portion in November 1900 to others. The ever rising price for real estate was a sure means to finance improvements on one's property.

By September 1897 English had a "mammoth log house" underway and both gentlemen continued to improve the landscaping, access and other features of their lands to the point that they were among the finest in the area. On the inside, English displayed a huge snake skin, presumably from a South American anaconda that reportedly measured fully 28-feet long.

The *Billboard* ran a spread of photos in the March 16, 1907 issue that documented the homes of America's leading show proprietors. Surprisingly, Charlie Thompson's place on the shore of Sarasota Bay was the only staffer's residence illustrated. Notably, it was also the sole example situated in a locale with an enjoyable wintertime climate. All others were in the cold north, up to Toronto, Canada.



Thompson's Sarasota home, *Palms Elysian*.

Pfening Collection

Two pictures above Thompson's home, in the *Billboard* layout, was the Hoosier Italianate manse of his former employer, Ben Wallace, located in wintry Peru, Indiana. As it turned out, B. E., as he styled himself, had journeyed down to Sarasota and visited Thompson's place, likely at his former employee's invitation. Surely there was a desire to induce the prominent Hoosier showman to buy a piece of land in the area. A photograph of Wallace, standing in front of the Thompson bungalow, ran in the July 13, 1907 issue of *Billboard*, an image that all readers readily saw.

Wallace apparently preferred the rich black soil of Miami County, Indiana and had just bought the Hagenbeck show, perhaps leaving him short of cash. He did not purchase any of the land that Thompson surely tried to broker. In the long term, Wallace's inaction proved providential. If Col. Ben had inserted himself into Shell Beach there is every reason to believe that no Ringling investment would ever have taken place in the Sarasota locale. His presence, character, methods and style were anathema to the "Sunday school" brothers and they would not have chanced being caught in any proximity or activity that involved the notorious showman.

Thompson, exercising his many years of diplomacy and humility as a representative for circuses, became well known in the Sarasota community. The *Sarasota Times* of October

13, 1910 declared him "a gentleman of unusual hospitality. He is very popular with all those in this section."

#### Ralph Caples, Railroad Man

John and Mable Ringling first vacationed in Florida in 1909. They spent their time in Tarpon Springs, near Tampa, but apparently did not feel comfortable in the uppity social scene. A "railroad man," Ralph C. Caples, the general agent for the New York Central Railroad who John probably knew from his circus contracting work, convinced the couple to come further south and to experience relaxation in Sarasota.

Caples and his wife, Ellen, who would become one of the grand dames of Sarasota social circles in years to come, first came to Sarasota in 1899 on a delayed honeymoon. They arrived at Bradenton by means of a steamboat from Tampa and then navigated the remaining twelve miles to Sarasota by horse and buggy in four hours.

They embraced the seaside village because of the spectacular view across the bay, but given his profession Caples also quickly planned the construction of a railroad between Tampa and Sarasota that would speed them to their destination. The Florida West Coast Railway was incorporated in July 1901, but his small cadre of investors was usurped by the much larger Seaboard Air Line Railroad (officially the

United States & West Indies Railroad & Steamship Company), which pushed ahead their plans by a reported five years to beat the upstart into Sarasota in March 1903.

Though he lost his \$5,000 investment, the action by Caples brought about the connection of Sarasota to the rest of the world by railroad and thereby advanced its future immeasurably. Caples and others bought several hundred acres of land on the Braden River on which to cultivate fruit. The city of Sarasota was incorporated about this time, on November 14, 1902.

The Caples couple continued to be tenants in Sarasota hotels, like Le Chalet, until mid-1909, when they came south in their private railroad car with a number of guests to relax at what was termed "their winter home," on Shell Beach. English had sold his home to a Bradenton couple named Bachman and they in turn sold it to the Capleses, their deed being recorded on July 20, 1909. The Caples couple also made a second purchase of unimproved property from Thompson on October 25, 1910. It established them in the foundation of the Sarasota colony.

The transaction and possession took place adequately in advance to enable Ralph and Ellen Caples to receive John and Mable Ringling when they visited that winter. What the Ringling couple saw, experienced and felt while being hosted by the Caples couple wasn't recorded, but it must have been exactly what they'd desired for a winter respite. The Chicago-oriented couple fit comfortably into the leisurely Gulf Coast shoreline lifestyle.

The relatively late and somewhat casual development of the area meant that there was no entrenched old guard or provincial social hierarchy to penetrate in order to become a functional member of the community. Though John was an accomplished and wealthy businessman of national renown, he had a limited education, was not from a prominent family and was known mostly as a traveling showman, qualities that polite society would usually find unappealing. The challenge was equally great for his beloved wife, Mable.

Over the next couple years the Capleses, Thompsons, and others received the Ringlings and wooed them towards establishing a winter residency in Sarasota. On one important visit in August 1911, John went fishing with Dr. Jack Halton, who was the lease holder for the local Belle Haven Inn, formerly known as the DeSoto Hotel, where many visitors to the area took rooms. It gave him unique knowledge about who was in the community.

Potter "Min" Palmer II, the son of Chicago's reigning dowager socialite, Bertha Palmer, and his wife lodged there during the winters of 1910 and 1911. During their stay, Pauline Palmer wrote her mother, providing some insights on the local scenes.

Sarasota itself is most wonderfully situated on the bay, with a chain of keys pro-

tecting it from the gulf. Such fish I have never seen—great big ones jumping several feet out of the water everywhere you look!

We took a motorboat after lunch yesterday and went out for a five-hour ride inside the keys down the coast. . . . Coming back to the hotel we stopped off on a key and walked over to the gulf side to see the afterglow. The beach was of very white sand and very firm and covered with thousands of different shells. The moon was getting bright, and the glow was fading off mild purple, so you can imagine what a wonderful sight it was. [From Eleanor Dwight, editor, *The Letters of Pauline Palmer 1908-1926: A Great Lady of Chicago's First Family*, (Scala Books, 2006).]

Identical delights were being enjoyed by John and Mable Ringling at the very same time, the experiences nudging them ever closer to property ownership. For a couple enthralled by the atmosphere, piazzas and canals of Venice, Italy, the incredible, glorious sunsets on a balmy sandy beach must have been like a dream come true.

### John and Charlie Buy in Sarasota

Ringling's slight delay in making a commitment to Florida is understandable. One must remember that in 1909 John and Mable were still residing on Chicago's Gold Coast and had an apartment in Manhattan. He was spending a lot of time on the road in his private railroad car and his participation in the management of Barnum & Bailey demanded his presence in New York, where he and Mable moved during 1910. He had three big Ringling-owned circuses to route in 1910 and 1911.

There was also international travel to manage. Starting in the winter of 1903, after having witnessed the ring talent that James A. Bailey had secured in Europe, John took to visiting Europe to scout for the newest and best acts that he could hire for the Ringling circus. These working trips were a whirlwind of activity that was arranged to take advantage of the holiday show season in England and on the continent. John and Mable had spent a few weeks in Europe scouting acts and touring, not returning until January 1911.

The brother with whom John was closest, Otto, passed away in March 1911. Youngest Ringling brother Henry went east to assist in Barnum & Bailey management, having acquired Otto's share. The apparent feeling was that Henry was generally competent, but required oversight, the result of the infamous bender that he'd gone on many years before. With his older brother Gus, he had managed Forepaugh-Sells a few years earlier and Mrs. James A. Bailey had inquired if



Main Street in Sarasota circa 1911.

Author's Collection

he might supervise Barnum & Bailey after her husband had passed away, as the show was struggling under a caretaker leadership.

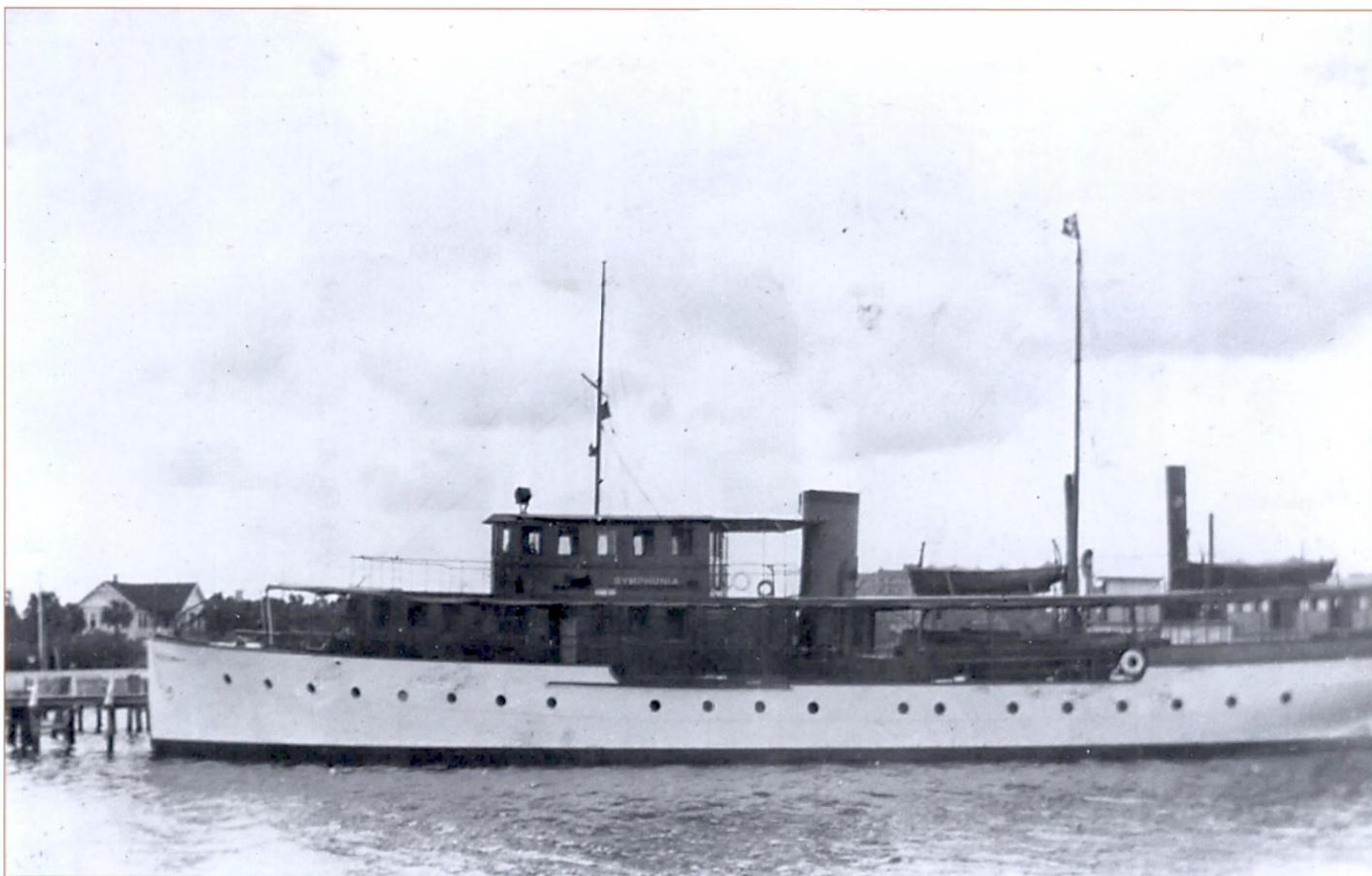
John's 1905-built private railroad car *Wisconsin*, now preserved and interpreted at the Ringling Museum, conveyed the Ringlings across the country in the interests of the Ringling circuses. It also served his private needs, delivering John and Mable to Tampa, Florida in the third week of August 1911. John had booked the brothers-owned Forepaugh-Sells show into Tampa on October 23 and he journeyed south to assure that all local railroad facilities and other arrangements were satisfactory.

In lieu of the usual boat passage along the coast, on this same trip John, Mable and a group of Tampa friends ventured by motor car down to Sarasota. After his late August departure from the area, a Tampa newspaper announced that John had just bought the winter home of Charles N. Thompson near Sarasota. The announcement revealed that a verbal agreement had been reached, with an October report indicating that they had already been given possession and were preparing the house for their return in the winter, likely after John's European scouting trip.

Presumably because he would not be returning for several months, John arranged for his trusted friend Ralph Caples to arrange the purchase of the Shell Beach proper-

ty and home as well as a large tract of adjacent land. The deal was recorded in the name of Caples on November 3, 1911. This acquisition became Ringling property via a second transaction, between Caples and Ringling, recorded on January 31, 1912. On the same date, the Capleses also sold John the other piece of unimproved property that they'd acquired from Thompson in 1910. Though this real estate was the first owned solely by John in Sarasota, he and Caples had jointly purchased a 130-acre parcel on December 28, 1911 from Arthur Britton Edwards and his wife, Fannie F., locals who were players in real estate and community development. This same Edwards nearly played the spoiler in another Ringling family deal in 1960.

The establishment of a winter retreat resonated within the Ringling clan, which had lost some of its familial connectivity following Mother Ringling's passing in early 1907. During the next few years, all of the surviving Ringlings, also established a link with Florida. Even oldest brother Al, who was deeply committed to his beloved Baraboo, and his wife Lou rented local homes and spent part of the winters of 1913 and 1914 in the area. One of their abodes was D. C. Broadway's place on Palm Avenue. This sort of seasonal rental remains very popular, unto this day. One report in mid-1912 alleged that Al was coming down to buy property and join his two brothers in erecting a home in the enclave



Charlie's yacht *Symphonia*.

Ringling Museum

north of Sarasota. To the end he remained a Baraboo boy.

The other Floridians and John convinced his brother Charlie and wife Edith that Sarasota would be a good place for them, too, so in the same year a second Ringling became a Sarasota land holder and commenced construction of his own home. The sale of another plot of land by Caples to Charlie, as well as a small parcel from John to his brother, were noted on April 16, 1912.

By December of that first year Charlie had his 60-foot launch cruising in the Gulf Coast waters. Charlie and John both augmented their lands with each making three more purchases a few years later. Once established, the two Ringlings and Caples proceeded to upgrade their adjoining properties, preparing their homes for electric power, erecting a 2000-foot long seawall, and constructing a broad shell road lined with palm trees to replace the former pathway. The landscaping and general character of these new winter retreats made them showplaces of the budding Gulf shore community. Their local leadership was demonstrated by their actions in improving their properties.

In a very unique way, the Ringlings acknowledged the importance of the Gulf Coast community in their lives. Starting in 1892, they acquired and traveled by means of a series of private railroad cars. Each was named, in succession, for a locale of some significance in their undertakings

as showmen. The cars were named, in order of acquisition, *Caledonia*, *Chicago*, *Wisconsin*, *Wisconsin*, *Connecticut* and *Chicago*. In 1913, the next one to join their fleet was christened the *Sarasota*. John was the most frequent user of the vehicle that bore testimony to the brothers association with the city. It was life on board the *Wisconsin* and also the *Sarasota* that John Ringling's personal employee Taylor Gordon, later a highly regarded singer, recalled in his memoir *Born to Be* (1929).

#### More Ringlings Head South

Younger brother Henry was also induced to buy a winter retreat, stated in June 1912 as being in the same area as his older brothers. His actual acquisition of interior land by Eustis, Lake County, near Orlando, was probably a means to avoid being under the overview of his dominant older brothers. Though Henry died in Baraboo, when family attorney John M. Kelley entered Henry's will into probate he did so in Florida, knowing that the state's laws provided a better shake for the inheritors. By then Baraboo was considered Henry and Ida's summer home, the Florida site being their principal and winter residence. Ida and her son had little passion for Florida. They maintained the Eustis property for just a couple years after Henry's 1918 passing, selling it in 1920.



*The Ringling private railroad car Sarasota was at the end of the last section of the Ringling show train leaving Baraboo, Wisconsin in this view from the mid-1910s.*

Circus World Museum

The sole Ringling sister, Ida North and her children commenced to winter in Sarasota in 1913, renting a Seventh Street bungalow and later taking rooms at the Hotel Welda. Her husband, Henry, whose principal purpose for the Ringlings seems to have been to sire her children, passed away in 1921. Five years later the remaining Norths moved permanently to Sarasota. They established a residence on Bird Key, which John had bought in 1922.

Alf T. Ringling reprised his 1906-1907 family visit to Sarasota with a solo return in March 1913. The desire for a winter retreat near his brothers likely sparked Alf T. Ringling to initiate the construction of a very modest but palatial "country house" in the Shell Beach section of Sarasota in 1919.

The Ringling clan was nationally known because of their circus operation. A particularly good profile of them was published by the *American Magazine* in the September 1919 issue. Commenting upon the brothers private lives, it advised:

The three remaining Ringling Brothers are largely interested in Sarasota. Messrs. John and Charles Ringling have for several years been making their winter home here,

and their winter residences are among the most beautiful in this section of wealthy winter residents and beautiful winter homes. Mr. Alf T. Ringling has recently purchased a most desirable bay front property from Mrs. Hemmingway, and work is in progress to erect a beautiful home on this property for him. Mr. John Ringling last year purchased the most desirable hotel site in the city and it has been rumored that he intends to erect thereon one of the most modern and commodious hotels in Florida.

Mrs. Ida Smith-Hemingway was the widow of Calvin A. Smith, president of the New York Life Insurance Company. She was a known local socialite and philanthropist, taking special interest in causes relating to African-Americans. Following her husband's passing, she arrived in Sarasota in 1911 and acquired the Gen. George Riggins property. After multiple enhancements, including the surrounding of it with orange trees, it was sold to Alf T. Ringling.

Alf T.'s death before his home was completed caused the finishing to be accomplished by his second wife, Eliza-



*The Sarasota home of Charles Ringling as viewed from the bay.*

Pfening Collection

beth, and his son from his first marriage in 1920. Richard T. Ringling inherited his father's share of Ringling-Barnum in 1919.

It may have been to give the 19-year old young man something to do that his Uncle John personally sold him a large ranch near White Sulphur Springs, Montana in 1916. Richard failed as the owner of the motorized R. T. Richards Circus that he and his father had framed for 1917. It was an early attempt at a truck show and only his father's passing had likely stopped the duo from following through on his father's vision of an airplane-borne circus. Presumably because of his 1917 failure and his reckless personal manners Richard was kept at arm's length from the Big One, but John's Sarasota place did serve as a honeymoon haven when the young man married in 1918.

Not to be outdone by his uncles and their estates and mansion building, in 1924 Richard sold the Shell Beach property to the developer of the Whitfield Estates, the brother of J. G. Whitfield, and purchased a 218-acre site with 1.5 miles of frontage in that development in south Sarasota between Boles Creek and Scott Avenue.

Strongly underscoring the reorientation of the Ringling family from Baraboo to Sarasota was a family reunion held at Charles and Edith's Florida home on January 21, 1915. It

was the first such full family-attended gathering since the day Mother Ringling had served her last meal in cold and wintry dark Baraboo. Reportedly all five of the surviving brothers and their spouses, including Alf T.'s ex-wife Della, were there, as well as all of their children. Their lives were orbiting around a different city and state.

Beyond family visitations, the Ringlings were active socially in the area, more so than they ever were while resident in Baraboo or elsewhere, as far as can be determined from news accounts. They hit something of a stride in Sarasota, particularly John and Charlie. Some of their local popularity may have stemmed from the series of boats and yachts that hosted popular cruise, fishing and party activities during their residency.

Any number of politicians, business scions and personal friends called upon the Ringlings in their winter home. The pinnacle of Ringling social life and prominence in Sarasota would have been reached with the winter visitation of President Warren G. Harding, had he not died prematurely on August 3, 1923. The house that Ida and her family later occupied, isolated and accessible only by boat on Bird Key, was to have served as a southern White House for Harding's occupancy, with John's yacht shuttling the presidential party between it and the mainland. The connection to Harding



Detail of Calvin Coolidge and wife with John Ringling in RBBB big top May 13, 1924.  
Ringling Museum

was through Caples, who had managed the Harding's 1920 campaign train. Harding was succeeded by Vice-President Calvin Coolidge. On May 13, 1924, on the first day of a two-day stand at Washington, D. C., the president and First Lady Grace Coolidge were seated next to John Ringling in the best seats of the world's biggest big top. No other circus owner in American history had been so close to the nation's leader. In reality, the president seemed less than enthusiastic about his presence, but his wife was a well-known and ardent fan of the circus and enjoyed every moment, visiting again when the show later played Duluth, Minnesota, near the summer White House in Brill, Wisconsin.

### The Legacy of Charlie Thompson

With his beachfront properties sold, Thompson relocated to another site within the Sarasota community. He believed that every human being regardless of their means was entitled to good housing and to that end he platted an area that he called Newtown, which became a residential area for blacks in Sarasota. Money was lent to people, fully realizing that he'd never be repaid.

Thompson closed with the Ringling outfit at Memphis on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917. He came home to Florida and spent four days fishing, fell ill on the next and went downhill thereafter. His front page, illustrated obituary in *Billboard* characterized him as "one of the country's best known circus men" as well as "one of the most popular showmen the outdoor world ever knew." "It was a byword of the arena that 'Charley Thompson never turned anybody away.'" The showmen's minister, Rev. Doc Waddell, also penned a special tribute to his fallen colleague. Thompson truly deserves credit for being the pivotal person in Florida's ascent to becoming the top circus state in the nation.

Thompson's family remained in the Sarasota area and his bona fide Buffalo Bill gloves with cuffs, which he prized,

were donated and are now displayed in the Tibbals Learning Center at the Ringling Museum. Bill English, moved north to St Petersburg and earned a reputation as a leading businessman in that community before passing away the day before his good friend Charlie Thompson. Jimmy DeWolfe, who authored the 1907 "Sandy and Me" stories in *Billboard*, didn't live to enjoy many winters in Florida. He expired from tuberculosis at his parents' home in Columbus in mid-1910.

### Investment and Development

Ralph Caples, John Ringling, and Charlie Ringling became staunch advocates for Sarasota, big city players in a small community that had grown 50%, from 840 to 1276, between 1910 and 1912. They were truly equals with other big fish in the developing Gulf coast area. Local opportunity was everywhere, the highly developed Atlantic coastline of Florida serving as a vision of what was possible. They were living in a beautiful and enthralling vacationland that they could develop in the same manner as others had built great resort communities elsewhere. Significantly, they imbued the area with a different demeanor, a sort of relaxed and convivial, yet progressive and "all business" attitude that one can still sense in the Sarasota area today.

Caples and a friend, attorney John F. Burkett, moved ahead immediately and bought the dominant hotel in town, the Belle Haven Inn, and 55 building lots in September 1912. The following year he erected the Caples Block on Main Street and continued to do more, all while serving in positions of increasing importance with railroads and other industrial firms until he established his own public relations firm specializing in railroad accounts in 1921. That same year, Burkett succeeded in his quest for the partitioning of Manatee County, thereby creating what is today Sarasota County to the south. The three also upgraded their residences, replacing their 19<sup>th</sup>-century style balloon frame digs with spacious 1920s mansions of fine quality that can still be seen today.

John and Charlie Ringling initially delayed their local real estate activities, but when they commenced the work it became national news by virtue of the familiarity of their name, through the travels of their circus, across the nation. John finally started to buy Sarasota real estate in large chunks in 1917, his first investment being the defunct yacht club on Cedar Point (now the heavily developed Golden Gate Point).

John may have waited until his brother Al, the leader to whom the other brothers deferred, passed away before initiating his full commitment to the Florida community. Respect and deference is a trait that one finds throughout the Ringling story. Important inflections in process and policy often took place after a death in the family, not only to carry on, but being reflective of no action taken that might have

offended the passing party while they were still alive.

The real estate, recreation, landscaping, infrastructure and banking developments that they accomplished in Sarasota are largely beyond the scope of this paper, though their breadth and existence formed the basis on which John later transferred Ringling-Barnum from Bridgeport to Sarasota. John's commitment to the area is exemplified in a 1925 statement about the new golf course: "I have committed myself so irrevocably to this development that I can scarcely see how I could go further or make my position more emphatic to carry out the project."

Considering modern Sarasota today, it boggles the mind to fathom what his extensive land holdings would be worth today when one considers that John once owned several of the keys and much other property.

#### Ringling Advocacy for Sarasota

The first possible indication of John Ringling's interest in bringing his family's circus to Florida was discussed in August 1911. The Tampa newspaper reported "He is considering bringing his immense shows to Tampa this winter." The statement would not seem to be connected solely with the pending autumn date of Forepaugh-Sells, nor was Ringling Bros. or Barnum & Bailey slated to play the area later in the year. It may simply have been nothing more than friendly talk that followed Ringling's purchase of property near Sarasota. Yet, John's choice of words revealed a bona fide interest in the Gulf Coast area of Florida.

By John's direction, the Ringling-Barnum circus started to promote the interests of Sarasota after he'd started to make personal investments in real estate in 1917. This was a decade before the circus relocated to the city. In November 1919 he declared that stickers testifying to the virtues of the community and the Gulf coast would be placed alongside circus posters. Such actions helped to re-shape the local identities of both John and Charlie from "circus man" to "benefactor."

The endorsements grew bigger with the rising level of Ringling investments.

During 1924 show performances, customers were given a colorful one-sheet poster that advertised "Sarasota by the Sea, Florida's Most Beautiful City." Stickers and a two-page insert in show programs featured the catchy phrase "Spend a Summer this Winter in Sarasota."

The Stanford White-designed aging (opened 1890), drafty and tubercular-feeling Madison Square Garden, par-



Program advertisement for Sarasota.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

tially owned by John, served as the venue for the All Florida Exposition, a trade fair that advertised the state's products. John was the principal backer for the 1924 undertaking. Support also came from railroads, like the Seaboard, and steamship companies that would benefit from Florida to New York commerce in foods and tourism. One might liken the expo to a "road show" that had gone from Florida to the Big Apple, forecasting a travel pattern that would soon come into clearer focus. The profusion of fresh oranges, grapefruits, coconuts, blooming flowers and palm trees brought part of the winter delight of Florida to the cold and barren North and as one reporter wrote, "made the Garden a garden for the first time."

The participation of Sarasota County, identified as the home of John Ringling, was highlighted by a 149-foot long pictorial banner given a choice elevated location at one end of the interior. It portrayed beckoning beaches and scenery. Below it was a gated area wherein the bounty of the county, 149 different varieties of plants, palms and flowers, and examples of the abundant wildlife, was arrayed. If that didn't get New Yorkers' attention, a giant thermometer, as tall as the interior, displayed the current temperature of Sarasota. It presented a stark contrast to the horrible blizzard, the worst in years, which raged outside the edifice. The 1925 display was slated to move from New York to Chicago and then to Toronto or Montreal.

John had long had the idea to stimulate the local Sarasota economy by means of a large fair staged during the early months of the year. His vision came to fruition during the last week of January 1924. The rapidly erected facility included a race track with a grandstand, and all the usual amenities associated with fairs elsewhere. A feature was the free Ringling rodeo, while a portion of the Johnny J. Jones Exposition, one of the two leading railroad carnivals of the time, provided a suitably down-sized midway. Both John and Charlie Ringling, their wives and business associates were seen in attendance.

#### A Management Model from Baseball

Among the many enterprises in which John Ringling had an interest were other amusement entities, including the aforementioned Madison Square Garden. It was a team of nine players that provided a management model by which the future of the Ringling-Barnum circus would be determined. Ringling was a friend of John J. McGraw, part owner, vice-president and manager of the New York Giants. The team spent the previous four winters practicing in San Antonio, Texas, far removed from their home base. In early November 1923, the circus man approached the ball club with the recommendation that they winter in Sarasota, where a ball park facility just happened to be awaiting them. A community backer named Calvin Payne had donated the land for a professional team field, which was molded into a



Samuel Gumpertz

Ringling Museum

suitable site by means of a community work day on October 18, 1923.

McGraw received no less than eight proposals from Florida cities, along with many others. Within three weeks Florida got the Giants signal and Sarasota got the deal. The players arrived on February 1<sup>st</sup>, but McGraw didn't arrive until March 2, 1924, having gone by steamer from Havana to Tampa and then with his wife boarded John Ringling's yacht to make the trip down to the Gulf Coast destination. There were obviously some fringe benefits to his decision selecting Sarasota.

In early 1925, as John Ringling and others were acquiring Charles A. Stoneham's interest in the Giants, a home was then being built for McGraw in Sarasota. The principal in the deal was none other than John Ringling's trusted friend, long-time Coney Island showman Sam Gumpertz. The Giants took leave of Sarasota after completing their spring 1927 practice, by which time another giant was headed towards Sarasota.<sup>17</sup>

## Florida Land Boom Attracts Showmen

Florida had an undeniable impact on showmen of all types. Initially they were attracted by the enjoyable winter weather, their respite from the hard, long hours spent working 30-week long seasons, from the spring to the fall. Then it became a matter of personal investments to make even greater profits than from their risky public recreation ventures. Industry observer R. S. Uzzell made these observations, documented in the *Proceedings* of the 1925 convention of the National Association of Amusement Parks:

All real estate opportunities are not in Florida, nor outside of our line of endeavor.

No business or profession these days is immune from the Florida boom. Many of our amusement men caught the virus. Ringling Brothers developed Sarasota County, Fla., and will make millions. B. G. Collier, the owner of Luna Park, Coney Island, owns all of Collier County, Fla., and will make several hundred millions. Our late Wm. H. Donaldson had just completed a palatial home at Sarasota, near his life-long friends, the Ringlings, and had just enjoyed a bath in his spacious private pool when the grim messenger of death made the fatal call.

We understand that Charles Browning and other of our members have been exposed to the Florida virus, but we don't yet know whether it has been taken.

And last but not least of importance, Mike Heim of Electric Park, Kansas City, who has had splendid results in all of his undertakings and had amassed a fortune before going to Florida got the habit about 14 years ago of going to Florida for the winter. He joined a gun club that acquired its own shooting range of 3,000 acres near Miami. He took a membership and paid the prevailing fee which gave him a proportionate interest in the range. As other members desired to sell, Heim acquired the different partnerships gradually until, eventually, he owned the entire range of 3,000 acres which had cost him a total of \$7,500. He sold it recently for \$2,000,000 cash. He has one regret. At the same time

he acquired the shooting range he bought a yacht and now laments the fact that he did not refrain from the yacht purchase and put the money into Florida real estate. In that event he would have made some real money.

William H. Donaldson, through the sales of posters by his Donaldson Lithographing Company and his 1894 commencement of publication of the trade magazine *Billboard*, came into contact with showmen in every aspect of the entertainment business. They were also colleagues at the annual meetings of the Showmens League of America and other similar fraternal gatherings. In this regard, the general feelings and knowledge about Florida's climate and real estate became common knowledge to all showmen, reinforcing what early circus pioneers had already learned by their visits. All went well until, like all booms, the Florida real estate bubble burst wide open and collapsed.

## Florida Land Boom Gone Bust

Simultaneous with the arrival of the Giants, Florida development advanced at a dizzying pace. As pioneer city historian Karl Grismer observed in his book, "Sarasota went real estate crazy during the winter of 1922-23. Stark, raving mad! Just like other resort cities in the state! They all became insane. And for three years the insanity became worse and worse." It was the natural result of the penetration of the state by the railroads, bringing Northerners and speculators with money. Flocks of Tin Can Tourists that came by highway, others by Pullman and the unprecedented go-go economy of the 1920s spelled progress for Florida.

The growing land value bubble was actually an investment disaster that would be replicated on a national basis in October 1929. By February 1926, the three-year long Florida land boom went bust. The city of Sarasota retrenched its acreage from 69 to 17 square miles as many real estate projects in the annexed areas were halted in partially completed status. The city slashed its budget by 41%. The ruinous price drop made it impossible to sell real estate except at huge loss and the lack of sale prospects made further investment irrational. But, there were exceptions: "John Ringling is still spending money in real, honest to goodness improvements . . ."<sup>18</sup>

## The Last Brother

John's Ringling's two biggest projects, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and the development of Longboat Key, were stopped. Yet, the most sobering event for John was not the flattening of the land boom and the deflation in values and his wealth, but the passing of his last brother, Charlie, in Sarasota, on December 3, 1926. The consolidated strength of the collaborative five was transformed into the absolute determina-



Charles Ringling and guests sit outside his Sarasota home.  
Ringling Museum

tion of one, who seemingly ruled by decree over his female relatives that owned two-thirds of the unincorporated circus. It was a very lonely walk that John made, when he left his brother's side and returned home. Only sister Ida would survive them.

Mr. Charlie's death removed a moderating influence on Mr. John. John reportedly viewed himself as the sole leader of the circus, the last of the founders, with something akin to eminent domain over the widows and other inheritors who held onto their circus holdings. One must remember that the Ringling Bros. circus existed as a business entity not by incorporation, but by the unwritten, ironclad verbal agreement between the brothers. Their word bound them more tightly than any piece of paper or governmental-sanctioned action; they had lived the life together, through challenge and prosperity, from the 1880s into the 1910s. "Ringling Bros." meant everything to them, it defined their existence. It's unclear, but doubtful that such a bond existed between John, his sister-in-law and his niece by marriage.

### A Chicago Model for a Legacy

Despite a commitment between the brothers to invest only in their circus, John started to plow money into businesses outside the circus by 1911, if not before. He had observed others growing their wealth faster than circus profits could support. Traveling the breadth of the country, opportunities must have been tossed his way without end. John also envisioned himself becoming a contributor to the economic development of the U.S., desiring to build something of a personal legacy. He succeeded in doing that, but not in the manner he had planned. It came about by default.

Railroads were the top of the game after the turn of the century, reaching their peak mileage about 1915, but John was not in a category to build transcontinental or even trunk lines. He settled on the ownership of several branch



The 1923 Ringling show in Cleveland, Ohio.  
Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

lines across the country. It made him a railroad magnate, a standing of some importance, regardless of the road's size, location or importance.

He also realized that he could be a land developer. The opportunity may have first struck him when he was in Chicago, where the Florida investments of Bertha Palmer were made known via articles in the Chicago newspapers. It is impossible to gauge the impact of Palmer's actions on John, but it is suspected that they were profound. Palmer's Florida investments must have been an eye-opener for John, providing a model for him to follow. In his case, though, Florida came first; then he devoted himself to an art collection.

When John Ringling relocated to Chicago in the mid-1890s, he initially resided in a Loop hotel, the Tremont House, but by 1903 he had moved to the Gold Coast, the North Side enclave that had been sparked by the erection of Potter and Bertha Palmer's castellated mansion along Lake Shore Drive in 1882. The local newspapers frequently commented upon activities of Chicago's superpower couple and they likely influenced Ringling in more ways than simply his choice of residency. They set a sort of role model for wealthy folks by their business, social and charitable actions.

The influence becomes more acute with the knowledge that several years after her husband's 1902 death Bertha Palmer followed up on an advertisement placed by J. H. Lord for Manatee County, Florida real estate in the January 23, 1910 *Chicago Tribune*. She proceeded to purchase some 80,000 acres of land in the vicinity of Osprey. One suspects that after John learned of Mrs. Palmer's action that it may have lodged in his mind as a possibility for him at a later date.

Bertha Palmer passed away in May 1918 and with her passing a slight void, in terms of high profile Sarasota land development, was created. Others, including Ralph Caples stepped in and accelerated the development of Sarasota



community, north of the Palmer holdings. To some degree, John also filled the Palmer void and more than any other individual became the national standard bearer for investment in the community. John's purchases were generally to the north of the Palmer properties and were more urban and less rural, involving much public benefit as opposed to solely private profit.

### Good-Bye Bridgeport

Ringling-Barnum in the Roaring 20s was as American as apple pie. It was, quite frankly, "The Circus." In reality, it had become a nostalgic and anachronistic horse-powered favorite, a parental-approved respite from Zelda-like living, flappers and fast people, suitable for grandparents, grandchildren and all those between. Attending the show arrival, watching the tents go up, visiting the side show, the menagerie and taking a seat in the big top were an American ritual.

In ways that are perhaps hard to comprehend, John Ringling was fully aware of the brand for which he had not only ownership, but also personal responsibility. The allure of the circus was likened to a veritable fountain of youth, to John's way of thinking. His duties were multiple: he provided child-like, escapist experience for audiences; he maintained a private, traveling zoo of animals; he kept loyal employees of many years standing employed, as well as hiring thousands of others; he paid income taxes to governmental agencies; and he paid profits to himself and the other owners. At times the duties were conflicted, sometimes by intent or arrogance, and those clashes ultimately resulted in John's undoing.

It was in the management of those duties, specifically the wintering expense of the circus, which resulted in the move to Sarasota. Land was available very cheaply in Florida and people needed work. Both were more costly in the northeast, where the Barnum show had established a presence in Bridgeport, Connecticut for the winter of 1881. It sustained

that operation for nearly the next five decades. The property had once been owned by the circus, but in order for him to buy out Barnum's heirs after the showman died, Bailey deeded the property to the descendants in the 1894 deal that gave him sole ownership of the Greatest Show on Earth.

Based on extensions of a lease first signed by his brother Otto in 1908, the term of the Bridgeport winter quarters lease was set to expire May 1, 1928, though another final extension may have been arranged. Having seen the Sarasota area real estate nose dive throughout the mid-1920s, it was clear that John needed to do something about it if he wanted to make good on his previously declared support for the community, as well as to safeguard the value of his own investments. With time needed to demolish the large brick structures at Bridgeport, a move off the property no later than the spring of 1927 was mandated.

As it was, a rumor had previously circulated in February 1925 that the circus would move to New Jersey. Past leases on the property had a term of ten years, but the one signed in 1924 was only for five years and three months, suggesting a vision of change on the horizon.

Ringling-Barnum reportedly paid a \$10,000 annual rent in the 1920s for the use of the Bridgeport property. The buildings were, in some cases, over four decades old, re-purposed factory structures, pre-dating the arrival of the show in the autumn of 1881. They were initially open to visitation, but their cramped and confined spaces had long since made a publicly-accessible zoo impossible. Though of brick construction and separated by some distance, there were no less than five major fires at the property between 1887 and 1924. A fire in February 1924 decimated the largest barn at the site, housing the big paint shop, and required investment in recycling the remnants and re-housing the displaced activities.

Of importance, with the exception of a ring barn, and perhaps a ring in the elephant house, there were no structures or spaces suitable for show rehearsals. Equestrian di-



*The Bridgeport quarters after the 1924 fire.*

Pfening Collection

rector Fred Bradna stated that it was Bailey's habit to throw the performance together in three days in the Garden. The Ringlings likely faced a similar trial by fire, when they took possession of the Coliseum in Chicago, as their Baraboo quarters had only limited practice facilities, for horse and elephant acts.

The nominal 10-acre Bridgeport site was also confined, hemmed in on all four sides by residences, streets, a firehouse and a railroad overpass, precluding any contiguous expansion. The limitation necessitated the rental of supplemental properties in the city to house the preparatory operations, including dress rehearsals. Being situated in the cold north, the structures also required steam heat all through the winter, a costly proposition given their immense size and uninsulated brick and tar paper on wooden sheathing roof construction. The bottom line was that the Bridgeport quarters was a cramped, aging and costly expense ill-suited for modern use. The one remaining advantage was the close proximity to the indoor opening in Madison Square Garden, the tent debut in Brooklyn and other important early dates in New England.

There were two other factors that played into the location criteria; one was taxation. John Ringling left Wisconsin a decade and a half before the state's 1911 income tax was passed. Illinois had no state income tax until 1969, but Cook County did have a personal property tax starting in 1903 that he viewed as a scourge. His next home, the State of New York, where he maintained an apartment until his death, did not implement a state income tax until about 1918, at which time John also had residences in New Jersey and Florida.

Though he had multiple homes, John was unable to avoid paying taxes to at least one state. The state legislature of Florida amended its constitution in 1924, at the start of the land boom. It banned state income taxes, which surely was an action appreciated by higher income earners who declared Florida residency.

John was also obliged to declare one state as his principal residency starting in 1913, when the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution created a federal income tax for the third time. One had previously passed in 1862-1872 and again in 1894, which was declared unconstitutional after 1895.

Federal income tax for corporations was initiated in

1909 at a modest rate of 1%. It did not rise until 1917, when it jumped to 6% and then doubled the following year to 12% remained between that figure and 13.75% until the passing of John Ringling. When Ringling-Barnum was incorporated in 1932, it was done so under the laws of the state of New Jersey, which was also advantageous for tax purposes.

Another key factor in the Florida location was the fact that John's longtime associate and close friend, Ralph Caples, was President of the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce in 1925 and 1926. The two men surely had discussions in regard to the future of city as the land boom that had brought so much to the area collapsed those efforts to nothing. Caples was succeeded by Charles Ringling, whose premature passing in 1926 resulted in John's nomination to fulfill his brother's post, as well as being re-elected to it in June 1927. Part of Sarasota's load was squarely on John's shoulders. It was time for him to lead the community by demonstrative effort.

At some point in the financial analysis there was a cross-over point between the defined Bridgeport expenses and the railroad charges to transport the show from a distant wintering location to New York City, the expense of establishing a new quarters and relocating of the firm's wintertime assets notwithstanding. During the course of a season, Ringling-Barnum always had to make a long home run, whether from the far west or the Deep South. What difference did it make if the expense of the home run was incurred first thing in the season, instead of being the last move of the tour? The early income from the Garden could cover the cost and what was lost in interest could be made up later. The transportation expense would be booked at some time during the season, incrementally as the show moved, or in one giant leap. Essentially, with the relocation from Bridgeport to Sarasota the show's routing practice was inverted.

### Hello Sarasota

John's need to fulfill his personal commitment to Sarasota, embodied in his personal investments and as head of the Chamber of Commerce, as well as a desire to raise local property values to stabilize investment in the community, were catalysts to take action. The establishment of the Giants baseball training camp in Sarasota, which proved to be a viable tourist destination, provided a satisfactory operating model for a winter in the south operation.

If there was any concern about relocation, the procurement of a suitable and financially-attractive site in Sarasota provided the final piece to complete the puzzle. It was manifest in a 152-acre site about three miles due west of downtown Sarasota, north of Fruitville Road at the southeast corner of Oriente Avenue (now Beneva Road) and 17<sup>th</sup> Street. It was a plot of land owned by the Sarasota Fair Association, which had conducted an agricultural fair on the site for just two years.

There was a \$48,000 mortgage on the property held by the East End Land Company, which was the development vehicle of three well-known Sarasota boosters: John Ringling's long-time friend and associate, Ralph Caples; then Mayor A. B. Edwards; and A. E. Cummer. To sweeten the deal for the circus, the three were inveigled to "forgive" their \$16,000 interests.

In a demonstration of support, the local railroads agreed to extend their lines to provide rail service to the new quarters. Further, the county board approved a deal on April 18<sup>th</sup> whereby state and local taxes on the property for a term of ten years were swapped in exchange for an equal amount of national advertising that would be provided by the circus. These sorts of inducements, not to mention TIF (Tax Increment Financing) districts, utility line installations, education grants and more are now commonplace as communities aggressively vie to be chosen as the location for corporate investment.

Were the community representatives and the trio of friends making a good deal for Sarasota, or was it a boondoggle to benefit a friend? In hindsight, there can be little doubt that the long term benefit was entirely positive. In the context of the events of the time, there was reason to support it. Not only would the circus presence spur some local recovery, but it followed in the path of works that John announced the month before.

On February 26, 1927, Ringling declared that he had recommence the work to complete the draw span and bridge between Lido and Longboat Keys as well as rush to a finish the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Longboat. His announcement, framed and highlighted in a full page newspaper ad, stated "There is to be no fanfare of trumpets, no loud and blatant array of promises. There has, perhaps, been too much of that in some sections, and it is my aim to have my performance of intentions speak more forcibly than any advance promise possibly could." John had posted, via his show ownership interest, more circus posters than any man then living and he knew that the real payoff was in the ring. He made good on his aim in making the announcement of the circus relocation to Sarasota, but the completion of the hotel was never accomplished.

For decades, there have been allegations that the circus did not have clear title to the winter quarters property. In 1959, as the winter quarters property was being cleared for private sale, former one-third owner A. B. Edwards testified twice that the land should revert to Sarasota County. A truly thorough investigation by the circus legal counsel, which revealed the transfer of deed, leases and even the checks that the circus had issued at the closing in 1927 to pay for the purchase, revealed that no reversionary clause existed. The county had once leased a portion of the property from the circus for use as a storage stockade, but as pointed out by the circus attorney, a tenant cannot deny his landlord's title.



*The Ringling Causeway in Sarasota.*

Ringling Museum

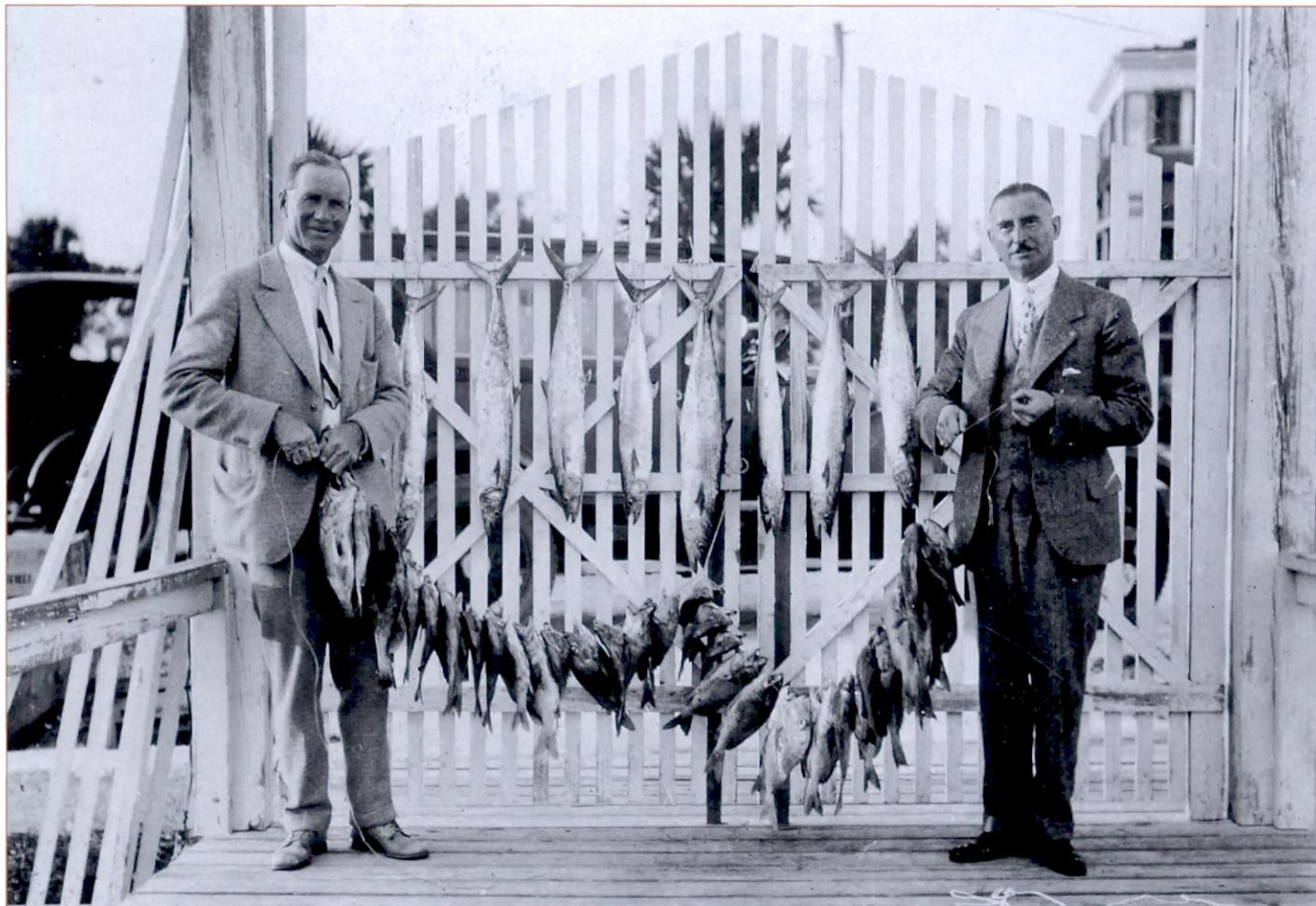
The fact that the land was never owned by any municipality or other governmental agency assured that the only rational claimants for it were the circus, the descendants of the deceased mortgage forgivers or a court-appointed representative for the independent Sarasota Fair Association. In the court action that followed, the circus was upheld as the clear and free owner of the property and thereby proceeded to sell it for redevelopment by Arthur Vining Davis's Arvida Corporation. It brought \$340,000 and was later developed as the Glen Oaks subdivision.

Though a court had ruled in the matter, the county board tried to obstruct the sale by trying to claim ownership over the stockade land in 1960. That attempt failed when a piece of paper was found with a declaration written on it reading: "This land shall belong to John Ringling" followed by "or his heirs" and the word "forever" applied later in ink. For a man who had a profound distaste for paperwork, this single piece secured for his heirs hundreds of thousands of dollars. Community advocates found it hard to let go of the land legitimately owned by the circus that they had eventually taken for granted—much like residents in Baraboo and Bridgeport.

In 1983, local writer Gene Plowden gave the legend of

non-ownership by the circus new life. His revival of the old saw was squelched by the attorney who had won the day for the circus. Another piece of Sarasota land on which the original courthouse was erected did have a reversionary clause, one that entitled Edith Ringling or her heirs to take it back should the county fail to use it for that purpose. Within the last decade, it was the county that found itself on the short end of the stick when the Ringling heirs pressed for the return of the property that no longer held a functional courthouse.

There were innumerable advantages that rapidly accrued from the relocation. The new site facilitated opening winter quarters to the public, wherein a fee could be charged and thereby some revenue gained during wintertime. The broad menagerie of animals, one of the best collections in America, could be viewed in less cramped spaces that benefitted animal health. Acts could practice outdoors and space could be provided to stage entire rehearsals of the circus before it moved into the Garden, assuring a higher quality performance from the get go. Attendance at the rehearsals assured that Americans from a broad section of the country would share news of their experience back home, thereby providing unequalled word of mouth endorsement for the circus.



Tex Rickard and Fred Bradna circa 1927.

Ringling Museum

when it came to their community.

The hospitable climate meant that buildings did not have to be heated and in some cases, such as the car shops, walls were unnecessary. Room was available for the largest expansion the mind could conceive. Staffers, performers and others who'd resided in the north and endured a long winter as their time off could now relax in the balmy skies, enjoying a sort of summertime that had never been their privilege while they traveled with the circus. Essentially, everything was in favor of the relocation south if the site finances worked. And, fortunately, they did, and superbly, largely because of John Ringling's prior associations with the community and its backers.

Locally, the circus did as it had done in Bridgeport and Baraboo. The railroad extended its trackage to provide rail service to the quarters and built the spurs on the property. Estimates ranging from one-half to one million dollars were placed on the cost to construct facilities to house the circus. Jobs were provided for skilled and unskilled labor in substantial numbers, the weekly payroll likely to be several thousand dollars per week. Monies were spent locally for supplies and services of a wide variety. Salaries and wages were expended for food, luxuries, vehicles and all of life's

sundry expenses. Importantly, housing would be needed for hundreds of circus employees, who would establish their permanent residency in the Sarasota area. The 1920 census identified 2,149 people in the city. That number swelled four-fold to 8,398 in 1930, testimony at least in part to the impact of the circus. Sarasota also became a city that was aggrandized across the country as a beautiful oasis in which to live and reside, or just visit, the programs of the circus proclaiming its virtues far and wide commencing with full page coverage in the 1928 edition.

The public announcement of the circus move from Bridgeport to Sarasota was not profound. John barely made comment, but simply confirmed earlier statements. Word came on March 23, 1927. The timing was such that it was heard first by those snowbirds that had spent the winter in Sarasota. John simply stated that the circus would winter in Florida during the coming winter. No declaration was made about an entire relocation of the huge winter quarters operation, no clarification made if it was a temporary or permanent action. Bridgeport reporters consulted people at the quarters, who knew nothing more than what they'd read in the newspapers.

Other circuses moved quarters annually, as convenient,

while some had shifted as opportunity became available. If John had a plan, as he surely must have, he wasn't tipping his hand to anyone. John played his hand expertly, leading up to and then executing the move.

The reports were initially likened to the annual rumors of relocation issued from Baraboo and then Bridgeport that always proved to be spurious. Preventing higher taxes had been their target, but this time the circumstances were different. Locally, since there was no elaboration, Bridgeport boosters wanted to believe that it would be a one-year absence. Isabel Foster, a writer for the Hartford *Daily Courant*, perceptively saw the parallel between Bridgeport and Sarasota. "The southern town has been Mr. Ringling's winter home for many years. He owns extensive property there. It is to him almost what Bridgeport was to P. T. Barnum."

The thought that the move might be temporary or a partitioning between the two cities vaporized when workers started to strip the northern winter quarters of everything from anvils to pictures on the wall within a few weeks, all for loading and shipment to Florida. By January 1930, all evidence of the circus presence in Bridgeport, other than some buried foundations, had been obliterated.

One of the surprising sidelight aspects of the Sarasota move is that Henry North offered no insight about it in his memoir about the Ringling family. In lieu of choice tidbits recalled for him by his Uncle John, North relied entirely on the sometimes faulted recollection of the circus's stiff-necked, Alsatian equestrian director, Fred Bradna. About as close a personal friend to Mr. John on the circus as any, Bradna was reportedly summoned away from his own indoor dates to Sarasota where John dropped the relocation news on him while gorging on a huge afternoon breakfast. John had worked behind the scenes to bring it about, dumbfounding his circus friend and catching him and all others completely off guard.

A stunned Bradna was sent north to tell the circus staff that the move to Sarasota was definitely taking place. It gave the higher ups a jump on selling their homes in what might prove to be a depressed market when others undertook the same action. For those accustomed to living in the shadow of New York City, with all of its cultural allures and other pluses, their lives would now revolve around a winter time that would replace the summer through which they perambulated around North America. They would all become part of the forces that would make and mold Sarasota into a thriving Gulf Coast community.

The simplicity of the "moving to Sarasota" message was overwhelmed by the identity and stature of the man making it. John Ringling was known coast to coast. At the time he was reputedly, by the statements of others, one of the ten richest men in America. What finer endorsement of a city could be made by the man than to move his flagship business, with his family name on it, into Sarasota? As he'd stated

earlier, "I have committed myself so irrevocably to this development that I can scarcely see how I could go further or make my position more emphatic to carry out the project."

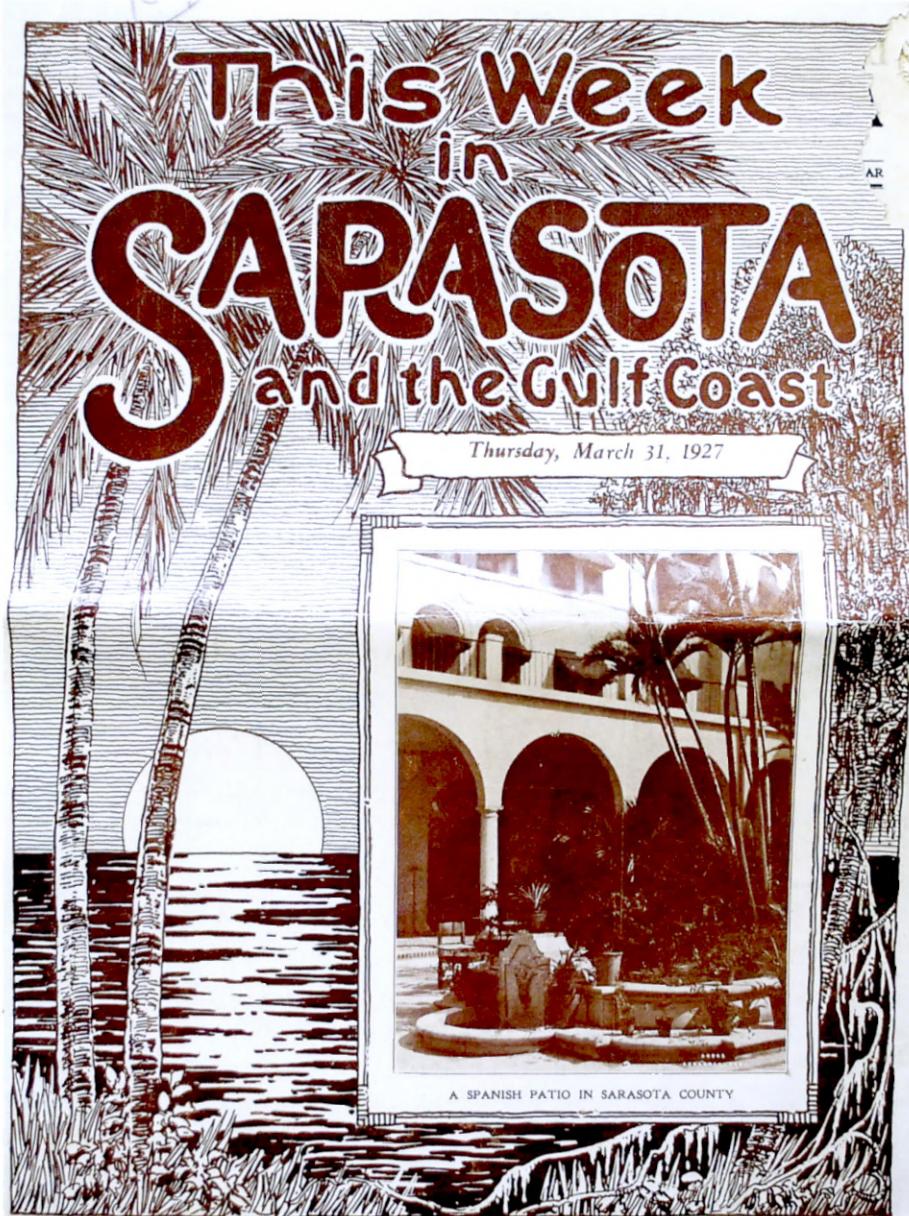
On March 23<sup>rd</sup> the Sarasota *Herald*'s front page headline trumpeted "Ringling Circus To Move Here," with a sub-heading "Gigantic 'Mardi Gras' Fete Is Assured Here For 1928." There was no ambiguity in its coverage; the Greatest Show on Earth was moving its quarters to the community. The action taken was declared the "Most Startling and Important Announcement Ever Made in History of Sarasota." The deal was set in a meeting of the Sarasota Fair Association held the previous afternoon. A select committee then called upon John Ringling to seal the deal.

That evening Ringling issued a public comment that electrified the local community. The new operation was described as a city unto itself that would bring 1100 people to the community. That was the employment of the big circus, but along with those folks would come their spouses, children and many others that would need to provide them with goods and services through a 22-week winter. It was an economic thunderclap that resonated everywhere, the best news that Gulf Coast Floridians had heard since the land boom had gone bust. John Ringling had stepped up to the plate and hit a three ring home run.

Recognition of the alignment of the Ringling show with the Gulf Coast city was swift and unified, made known in the local newspapers and promotional magazines, like *This Week in Sarasota* and the *Gulf Coast*. The Sarasota City Council on March 28th declared it "expedient to the public interest to further in every way in its power the establishment of the Ringling Circus in Sarasota." Dudley V. Haddock of the Florida State Chamber of Commerce assessed the importance of the move.

The [winter] season was nearing its conclusion with Sarasota's people wondering how much they would have to economize to pull through the summer when John Ringling's announcement came. It changed the situation completely. To prepare for the arrival of the circus, Ringling must spend approximately \$500,000 in the erection of buildings. This assures a large payroll through the summer, and once the circus is here, it will mean the employment of mechanics in the building and repairing of circus wagons, railroad cars and other equipment. It will involve the distribution of hundreds of thousands in Sarasota annually thereafter.

For a local public largely unfamiliar with the vastness of the circus, some articles detailed the unbelievable numbers



Cover of the March 31, 1927 issue of *This Week in Sarasota*. Circus World Museum

that characterized the show: 100 railroad cars; 28 departments; 1500 employees; 750 horses; 40 elephants; a big top that once housed 17,000 for a single matinee show; 4500 meals prepared and served per day. These were statistics, mostly accurate, that could boggle any mind, especially when it was acknowledged that it moved on a daily basis and also gave two complete shows, a continuous side show, as well as caring for the traveling zoo.

Public credit for the circus relocation did not point to John, which would have been perceived as self-serving, especially if the details of the fairground land deal were made known. Incredibly, it was given to Sam Gumpertz, the man that would replace John at the circus helm in 1932. He'd been the negotiator with the Fair Association, which had received his suggestion that they deed their property to Ringling at a reasonable price, with all obligations also being transferred

to the capitalist. It is unimaginable that John Ringling had not been directly involved with the development of the proposal. In later years, James Haley declared that he'd originally proposed the idea to John. Ringling often let others do the talking and the credit-taking; he coveted the money that flowed from the well-planned and executed actions.

The show trains supporting the annual indoor engagement at the Garden departed from Bridgeport for New York City in mid-March 1918, followed about a month later by the canvas train for Brooklyn, where the outdoor tour commenced. The last major Ringling-Barnum remnants loaded out of Bridgeport for the last time on May 4, 1927.

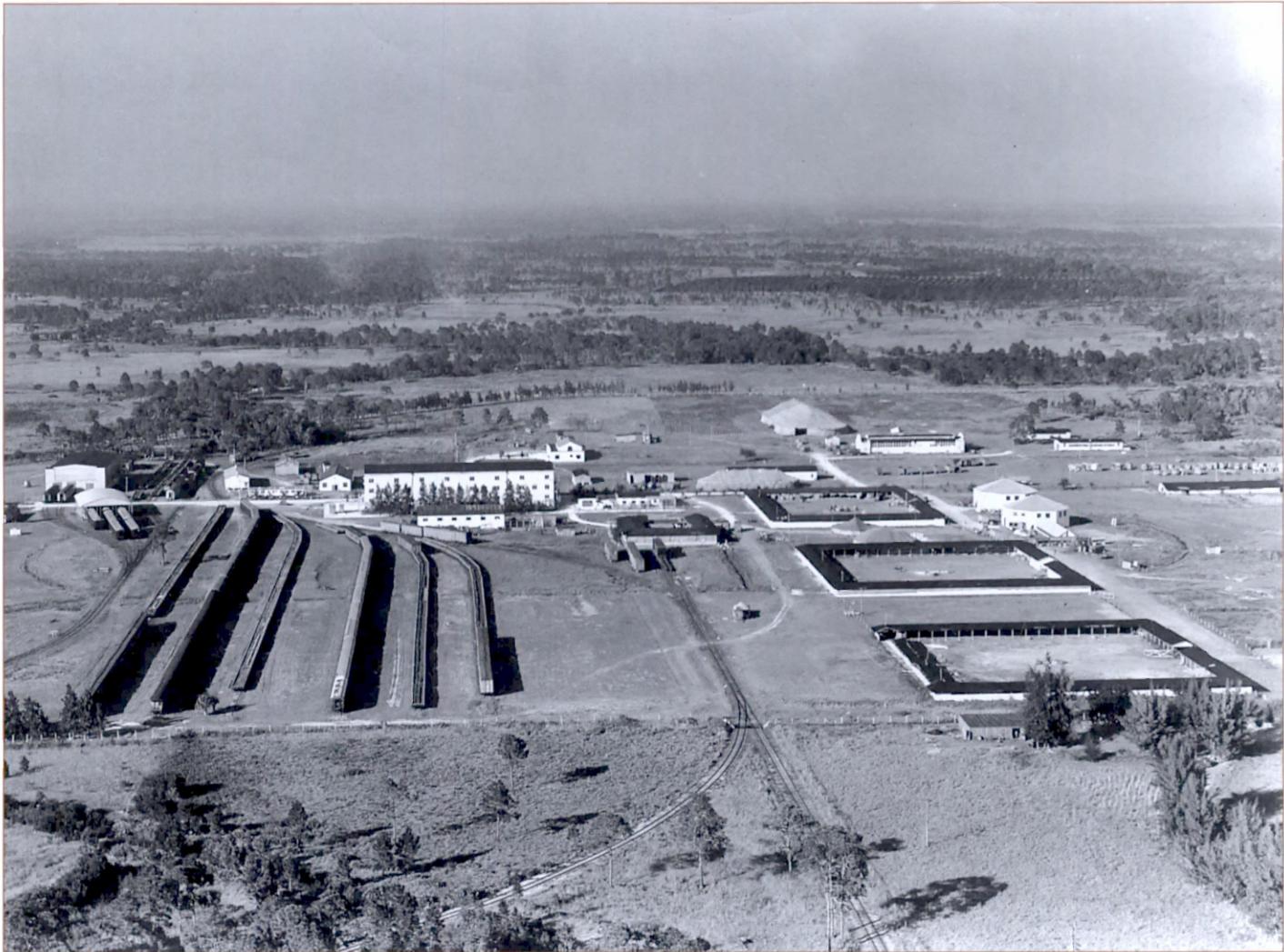
Tom Lynch and Jack McIntyre, the two most senior RBBB employees, mounted a baggage wagon inside the perimeter of the Bridgeport quarters and symbolically drove it out onto Norman Street, amidst a throng of Lynch's neighbors who had turned out for the historic departure. Someone tried to raise a cheer for the 50-year plus veterans, but no effort roused the crowd. There may have been a half-hearted "hip, hip," but there was no "hooray."

Past spring time good-byes had been temporary; they knew that this one was permanent. It wasn't a time to celebrate, but to mourn a passing, an ending of a near half-century of local circus heritage and community connection.

It must have almost seemed like an insult when in the following year local Bridgeport tinplate toy maker Ives issued the first set of circus cars for home train layouts. The yellow and red color scheme applied to the various vehicles was derived from the Ringling-Barnum cars that would no longer be seen in the community except on "Circus Day." Only the little circus cars whirling around under the Christmas tree were to be seen by Bridgeport kids in the years to come.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, The Greatest Show on Earth, completed the 1927 route at Tampa, Florida on November 3. Starting something of a tradition, many Sarasotans went north to give the circus a full house at the last engagement of the year, a hearty welcome for their newest residents.

Time was necessary to organize and arrange all of the



*An aerial view of the Sarasota Winter Quarters in the 1940s.*

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

equipment, apparatus and animals that had come south from Bridgeport in several shipments, as well as on the four trains of 98 cars that had conveyed the circus to its new home. All of the preparations necessary were accomplished in time to open the new home of the circus to the public on Christmas Day, 1927. A small admission fee was charged with the proceeds going to the John Ringling Community Chest Fund.

The boys of Baraboo and Bridgeport would be amazed if they'd been able to be there that day. All of their old favorites were still to be seen and they didn't have to sneak in the gate to see them. Even Mom and Dad, and brother and sister could come along, making it an experience for the entire family.

Between Christmas Day and when the circus departed on March 27, 1928 for Madison Square Garden, some 65,000 people paid an admission to tour the winter quarters, many surely having seen such a facility for the very first time.

A treat for the locals arrived seven months later, on October 27, 1928, when for the very first time Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows erected its city of

tents near the Atlantic Coast Line depot and presented the final two performances of the 1928 tour in Sarasota. The home run that year turned out to be one of the shortest in circus annals, shorter than the moves between Minneapolis and St. Paul; Sarasota depot to winter quarters.

The fulfillment of another Ringling obligation in regard to taking possession of the fairgrounds was to have the quarters serve as a venue for an exotic spring pageant to highlight the winter season. It occurred on March 8 to 10, 1928. The successful *Sara de Sota* Pageant was directed by that good friend of John Ringling, none other than Sam Gumpertz.

All of the advantages of wintering the Greatest Show on Earth in Florida were being realized, laying a sound foundation for what would prove to be more than a three-decade long association.

Ringling wasted no time in promoting Sarasota via the circus. The 1928 program included six postcard style views of the city features and provided a contact mail address for further information. That was the manner in which communications were initiated at the time.

## Success in Sarasota

John Ringling's vision to reinvigorate the future of Sarasota by relocating his circus revolutionized the Gulf Coast area and paid dividends that are still being richly enjoyed today, eighty-five years later. He created a travel destination for a broad band of the population where none had existed, transforming the land from a seasonal getaway for primarily the wealthy to a residential Mecca for all classes. Nearly nine decades after his passing the community memory has forgotten the breadth of his legacy, prompting them to remove his name in favor of latter day personages.

Florida is today the fourth most populous state in the Union and the metro Sarasota area is well over a million in population. The biggest problem for the historian today is reconciling modern Sarasota with images and documents that reveal the quaint coastal village of the past that beckoned Northerners with its broad beaches and balmy skies. It's a long time between the day when John and Mable explored the shoreline in a cat boat and now, when high end luxury cars by the dozens zoom around on ribbons of endless concrete.

Each successive generation seems to have destroyed remnants of the prior civilization, development having had a much more prominent role than preservation in the city's history. In a way, that aspect of community character is also a continuation of John Ringling's investments. He made something new of what was there upon his arrival, initiating a never-ending development of a community of great natural beauty.

Within Ringling's Sarasota installation can be seen the roots of Florida's tourist economy of today, including: Walt Disney World and its zoological attraction; Busch Gardens zoo and publicly accessible brewery (industry); and Universal Studios and the behind the scenes action stages. All were anticipated by John's vision to take the circus preparations from behind protective walls and to place it on public display, akin to the "free" show that took place when the circus arrived in town, unloaded and set up house before an observant and engaged public.

The backstage pass to the circus was one of the most favored activities for Florida visitors from 1927 until the site was closed in 1956. For anyone desiring the flavor of the experience, prolific circus historian and friend Joe Bradbury penned a glorious tribute, "How Dear to My Heart are the Memories of Sarasota" for the March-April 1961 issue of the Circus Fans Association journal *White Tops*. It is highly recommend it for anyone desiring a time machine back to a different time.

Ringling-Barnum has remained quartered in the state since 1927 and recently occupied a huge consolidated operations center north of Sarasota, in Ellenton. They have offices and meeting rooms, rebuild huge railroad cars, cre-

ate and maintain elegant wardrobe, fabricate performance props and all sorts of related activities. Importantly, no less than three Feld Entertainment traveling productions can rehearse within the confines of the huge structure. It would awe James A. Bailey. What started with John Ringling has blossomed into a new era under Kenneth Feld and his three daughters. Within little more than a decade the Greatest Show on Earth will celebrate a century of association with Florida.

Perhaps someday there will be a corporate realization that the newest facility can morph from an expense center to a revenue and public engagement center, re-fulfilling John Ringling's vision of a circus Mecca in the Sarasota area. Mr. John's move re-focused the heart of the American circus business to Florida and it's been here ever since, home to dozens of circuses, proprietors and producers, as well as thousands of staffers, performers and working people.

As the Badger State was before it, now is the Sunshine State the circus capital of America. It all happened because they traded snowballs for baseballs, and the Ringling circus moved from Wisconsin to Florida.

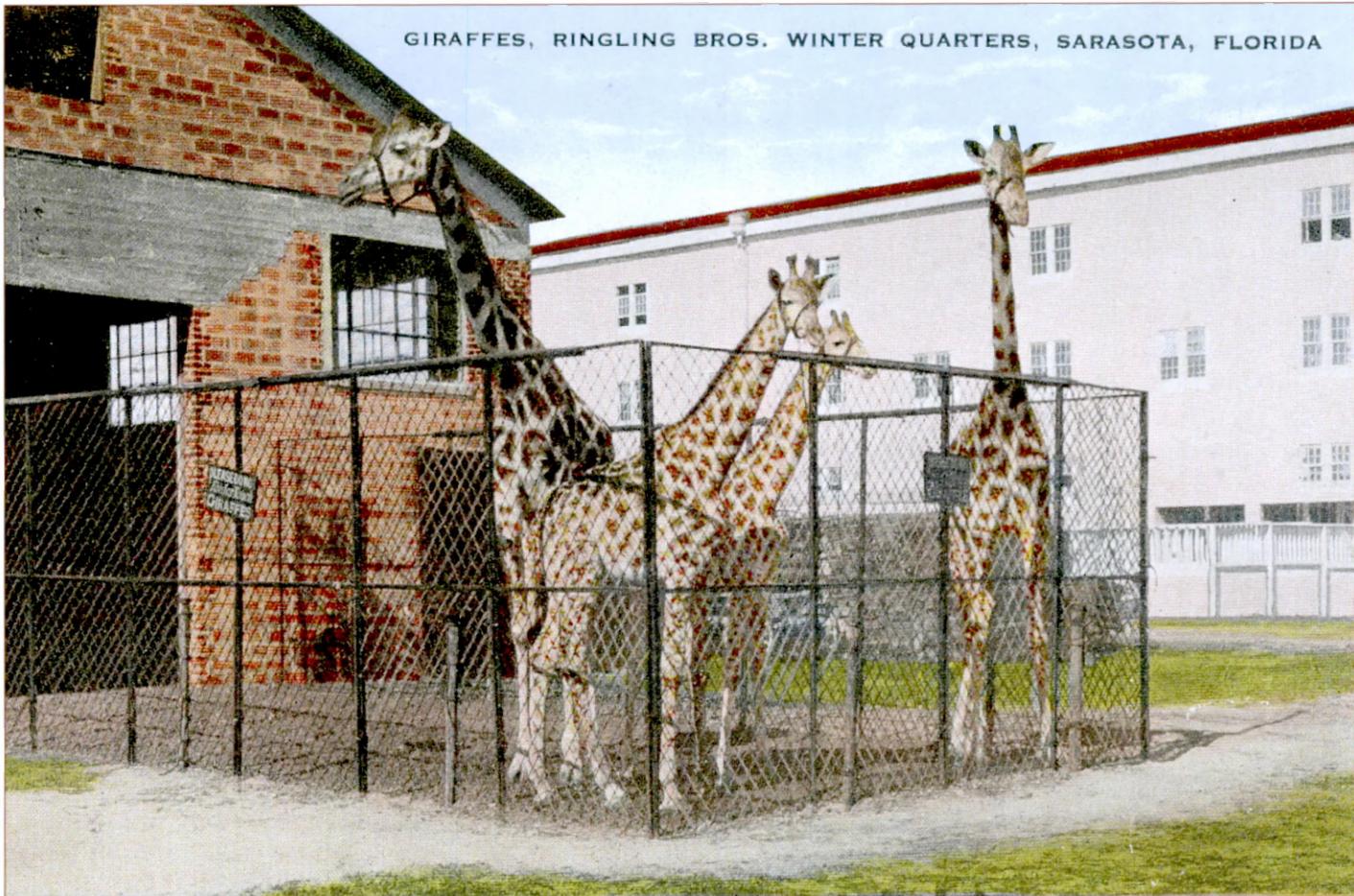
## Epilogue

Through the next decade, the 1930s, John Ringling's bold relocation of the family circus business to Sarasota played out in a way far different from what he envisioned in 1927. In the short term the move bolstered his adopted home town. The long term results went somewhat astray, though one could argue he provided a three-decade long shot in the arm to the city, which proliferated in far greater development of the community than even he could have imagined. It has prospered so much that his foundational work is almost totally obscured and forgotten by a highly mobile and transient residency.

In a move that must surely have rankled John Ringling, promoters of the City of Bradenton, Florida, the community adjoining Sarasota's northern boundary, made a pitch in mid-1928 to the John Robinson Circus in mid-1928 to relocate from Peru, Indiana to their community. The show was one of the three tightly-managed outfits owned by the American Circus Corporation. It was also one that had earned a strong reputation and enduring popularity in the South, owing to operating out of the Cincinnati area for many years.

It was a graft-embracing outfit, operating contrary to the Ringlings' interests to clean up the traveling show trade. The books that recorded the illegal income were a problem for the action planned by the Corporations owners—to take it public with a stock sale. Bailey had made a bundle by doing the same thing with Barnum & Bailey in the late 1890s.

The Corporation's owners, Jerry Mugivan, Bert Bowers and Ed Ballard "sanitized" the firm's books by creating a new entity, the Circus City Zoological Gardens, Inc. Thereby



The giraffe enclosure at winter quarters, circa 1930.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

they provided a clean and appropriate set of books suitable for scrutiny in advance of the envisioned stock sale. Once sold out, the trio would live off the inflated proceeds from the stock sale.

Bradenton's principal selling point was that RBBB had already moved to the area, to Sarasota, and was very happy with the results. An underlying aspect of the situation may have been the loss by fire of some of the large barns at the Peru site. Work to replace them to house the Robinson outfit was placed on hold pending a decision on the Bradenton proposal. Reportedly the *Peru Republican* confirmed that all work locally was being placed on hiatus.

The package offered by the Bradenton Chamber of Commerce, according to the *Sarasota Herald* of June 16, 1928, included the usual attractive perks: "free land, free buildings, free water, free heat, and exemption from taxes." Obviously, the city fathers strongly desired the winter quarters payroll to bolster their local economy. Bradenton was the Manatee County seat and then had a population of 15,000. The results from the RBBB installation were so positive that a special chamber committee was appointed to prepare a contract if a green light was indicated from Peru.

Whether John Ringling and his circle of influential friends stepped forward to nix the proposal in whatever

ways they could, including working behind the scenes, is unknown. It was a two-edged sword for the Ringling show; it helped the local community but could have increased competition for skilled winter workers.

It was the first time that a second circus, one that was non-Ringling owned, was enticed to call the Sarasota area home. Given the Corporation's pre-occupation with other weighty matters, including the acquisition of two other circuses for 1929 and more, the Bradenton offer probably served as little more than a heartburn generator for John Ringling and those associated with him. The owners of the Robinson show had little incentive to make the move, but it was another means that Mugivan, Bowers and Ballard used to tweak the leading circus man of the nation, and possibly assure that taxes remained as low as possible on their Peru installation.

The outcome mattered little. Larger forces, of such a magnitude that the circus and all decisions attendant thereto were irrelevant, were about to change the entire world.

In March 1929 the frailty of the U. S. stock market was acknowledged by the Federal Reserve. Despite the warning, the market continued to rise until it reached a pinnacle on September 3, 1929. During the final assault on the inflated value plateau, on August 30, 1929, John Ringling, who was

acting personally, and essentially as an understood agent for the unincorporated RBBB Combined Shows, bought the Circus City Zoological Gardens Inc. and the five railroad circuses (John Robinson, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, Al G. Barnes and Sparks) and winter quarters facilities that were operated under its banner.

For a man that had made routing, contracting and business decisions based on clear understanding of critical timing criteria throughout his entire career it was the worst thing he could have done. The market collapse started in earnest in mid-September and tanked on October 24 when the opening bell signaled an eleven per cent drop. It was the harbinger of greater losses to come, culminating in the severe sell-offs on October 28-29. The ensuing, decade-long Great Depression wreaked havoc on the national economy, the circus industry and John Ringling. The moment of his greatest triumph was transformed into his worst nightmare.

The five Corporation shows were taken under the trusted Ringling banner. While his principal partners were consulted prior to the transaction, and there was a vision involved in doing the deal, it was a gutsy move. It essentially doubled the breadth of the holdings that James A. Bailey had once had under his command.

An over-riding drain on resources, resulting from lagging profits and unrelenting expenses, forced the closure of Peru-based John Robinson after the 1930 tour. Sparks, which was once the highest-regarded circus in the land, was dispatched to RBBB's Sarasota quarters at the end of the 1930 season. It thereby became the first troupe to follow the Ringling show into quarters in Sarasota, as well as the second circus to emerge from the city in the spring for a road tour.

John Ringling had likely been instrumental in the decision to move the show from its Macon, Georgia home to the Gulf Coast, an action that can be interpreted as both a cost savings and an action to add another payroll to local coffers. Sparks emerged from the winter cocoon and toured in 1931 and returned again to Sarasota, but it was the end of the line for the famed title.

The aggregation of many issues culminated for John Ringling on July 13, 1932, when he signed papers, in the presence of William M. Greve and John M. Kelley, which ultimately led to his removal as active general manager of the circus empire and made him into little more than a name figurehead in a new corporation. He did so under a threat from his note holder, who threatened to attach RBBB the next day, during their stand at Steubenville, Ohio. The transfer of authority happened through a series of events facilitated by Kelley, his personal attorney, who in a significant conflict of interest doubled as the show's legal representative. The participants were: his one-time close friend Gumpertz; Allied Owners, the show's mortgage holder and

holder of a 10% interest, represented by his personal friend Greve; and his two partners, his sister-in-law Edith Ringling and niece by marriage, Aubrey Ringling.

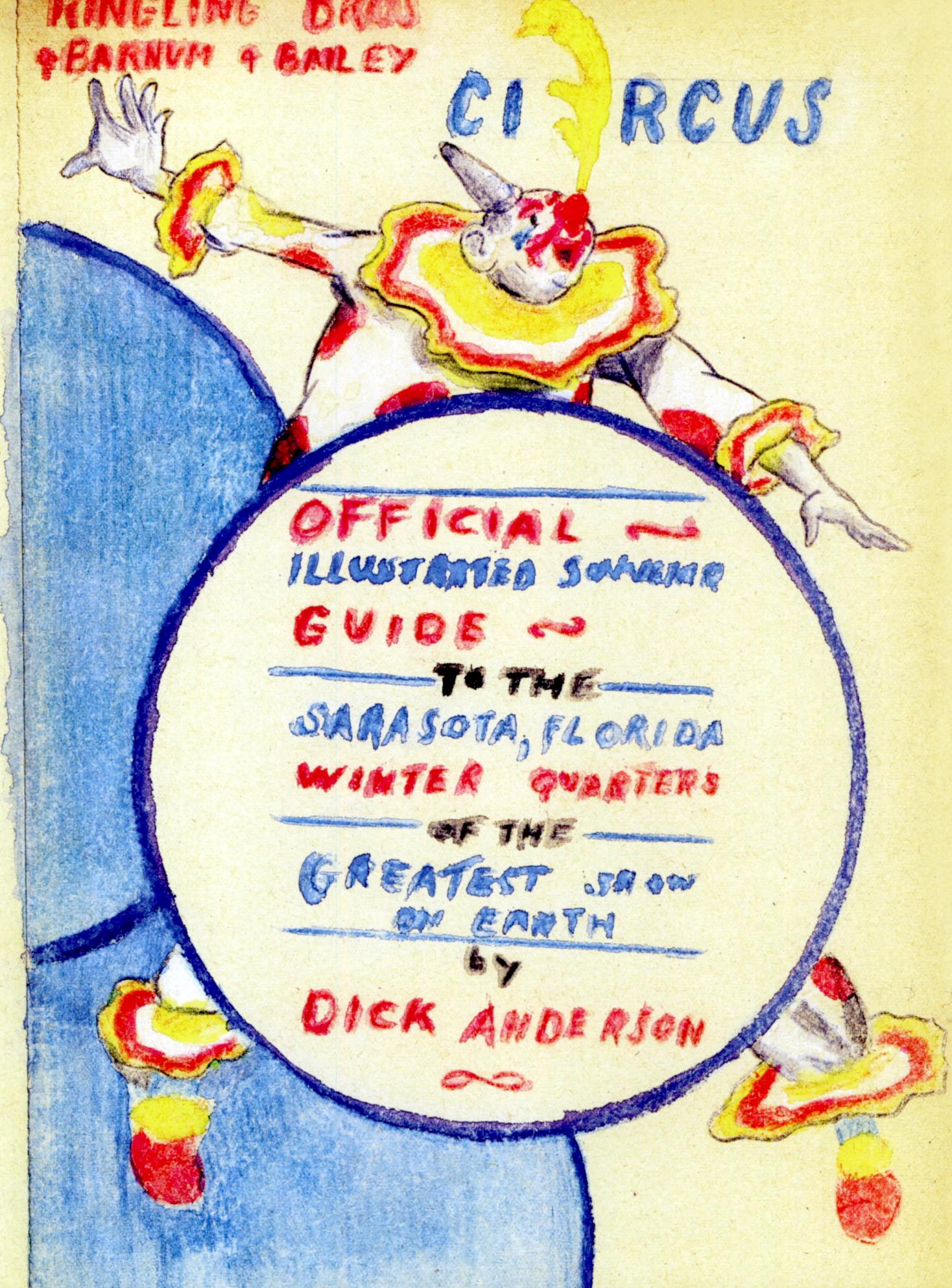
Gumpertz, resident of Sarasota, Florida, came away as Senior Vice-President, to serve as the general manager of all Ringling enterprises. John Ringling, also resident in Sarasota, was out. Though the titular President, it was understood that he had zero authority. Even all of his resources, including his personally dear art collection, were tied up as collateral by the agreements that he accepted as an alternative to an involuntary bankruptcy of the circus enterprise. Deprived of the profession he had practiced since 1879, he no longer had a position of authority from which he could benefit the circus or Sarasota. For the last four and a half years of his life, John Ringling was a bystander to the world that he created when he brought the Ringling circus to Sarasota. **Bw**

#### Endnotes

1. Fred Dahlinger Jr. and Stuart Thayer, *Badger State Showmen, A History of Wisconsin's Circus Heritage*, (Madison, WI: Grote Publishing, 1998), vii.
2. *Sauk County Democrat*, January 5, 1916.
3. *Baraboo Weekly News*, May 30, 1912.
4. *Baraboo Daily Republic*, October 10, 1905, citing the *Chicago American*.
5. Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, *The Circus Kings, Our Ringling Family Story*, (1960: rpt. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2008), 79 and 149.
6. "Personality List Makes \$91,200,000," *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1903; "Ringling Sued for Back Taxes," *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1908; "Ringling Eclipses John D. Rockefeller as Star Process Dodger," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1908; "Circus Man Accepts Service," *Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 1908.]
7. *Baraboo Weekly News*, May 30, 1912.]
8. Ringling business records, Fred D. Pfening III collection.
9. There were annual threats of relocation. See as examples "Ringlings to remain," *Sauk County Democrat*, September 16, 1897; "Ringling News," *New York Clipper*, July 24, 1909, 605; and April 27, 1912, 17.
10. "Still a Question," *Billboard*, May 25, 1918, 26.
11. Letter from Ida B. Ringling to Charles Philip Fox dated May 15, 1956, C. P. Fox Papers, Circus World Museum, which served as the basis for the account in Fox's *A Ticket to the Circus*, (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), 176-177.
12. "One Show Only," *Billboard*, October 19, 1918, 54, and "Ringling show may come soon," *Baraboo Weekly News*, September 4, 1919.
13. "Former Ringling Quarters," *Billboard*, March 22, 1924, 89.
14. "Circus Going Loss to Baraboo," *Sauk County Democrat*, July 12, 1919.
15. Dahlinger and Thayer, 115-116.
16. *New York Clipper*, March 19, 1870, 399.
17. "Ringling, Circus Owner, Will Buy New York Giants," *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1932.
18. "Florida Still Doing Business, Says Attorney," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1926.

RINGLING BROS  
& BARNUM & BAILEY

CIRCUS

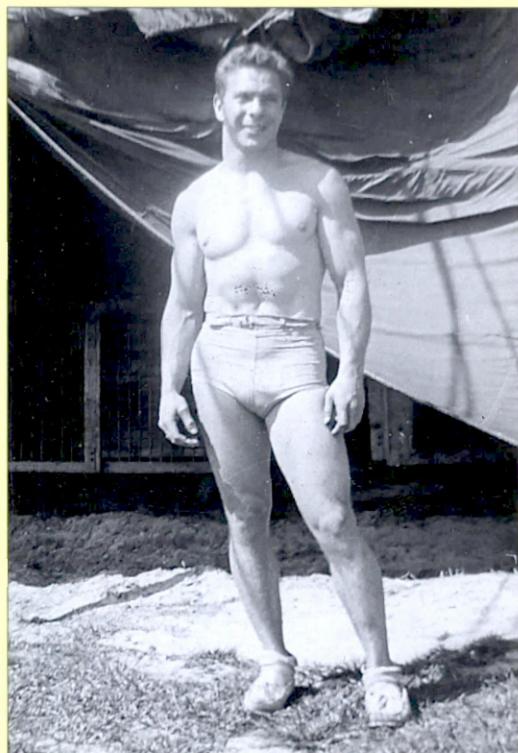


OFFICIAL —  
ILLUSTRATED SOUVENIR  
GUIDE —  
TO THE  
SARASOTA, FLORIDA  
WINTER QUARTERS  
OF THE  
GREATEST SHOW  
ON EARTH  
by  
DICK ANDERSON

# Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus

## Official Illustrated Souvenir Guide to the Sarasota, Florida Winter Quarters of the Greatest Show on Earth

a memoir and photos by Dick Anderson



March 22, 1943. Me all set for practice at Winter Quarters. Picture taken by Patty LaMaire now a member of the Ice Parade of 1944.

February 17, 1943

Arrived in Sarasota, Fla., at 9:15 p.m. on Tuesday the 16<sup>th</sup>, four and a half hours late. The trip was a miserable one coming down with a few transfers, but plenty of over crowdedness. We left freezing weather home and came into pleasant weather, which was considered cold by the local residences. My entire trip was in the company of Mrs. Robert (Edith McVaugh) Davis; Rib's wife. I spent my first night in Sarasota with her family in their trailer at Trailer City.<sup>1</sup>

On Wednesday I had located a room at 140 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street<sup>2</sup> and it was very nice; in the home of Mr. Taylor,<sup>3</sup> who had real estate in Sarasota. After I got located Mr. McVaugh<sup>4</sup> took me out to Winter Quarters,<sup>5</sup> which I found to be much better than I imagined. I didn't practice anything, though I did swing on the fly bar of the flying rigging a few times. I spent the day renewing old friendships and later helped Art Concello, Tuffy Genders, Joe Remillet, and Bob Martin fix cable and guy wires used on the flying acts.

February 18, 1943

Rode out to the Winter Quarters with Bob Martin and Joe Remillet in Tuffy Genders car. Practiced a little on the bars and also on the flying rigging. Also practiced catching and Bob Martin was going to fly to me from a hocks off<sup>6</sup> but we couldn't get together on it. Returned home after the day's practice and in the evening walked out the Ringling Causeway to the last island (Ringling Isle) and saw the Gulf of Mexico. Returned from the walk and went to see *China Girl* with Gene Tierney at the Florida Theatre.<sup>7</sup>

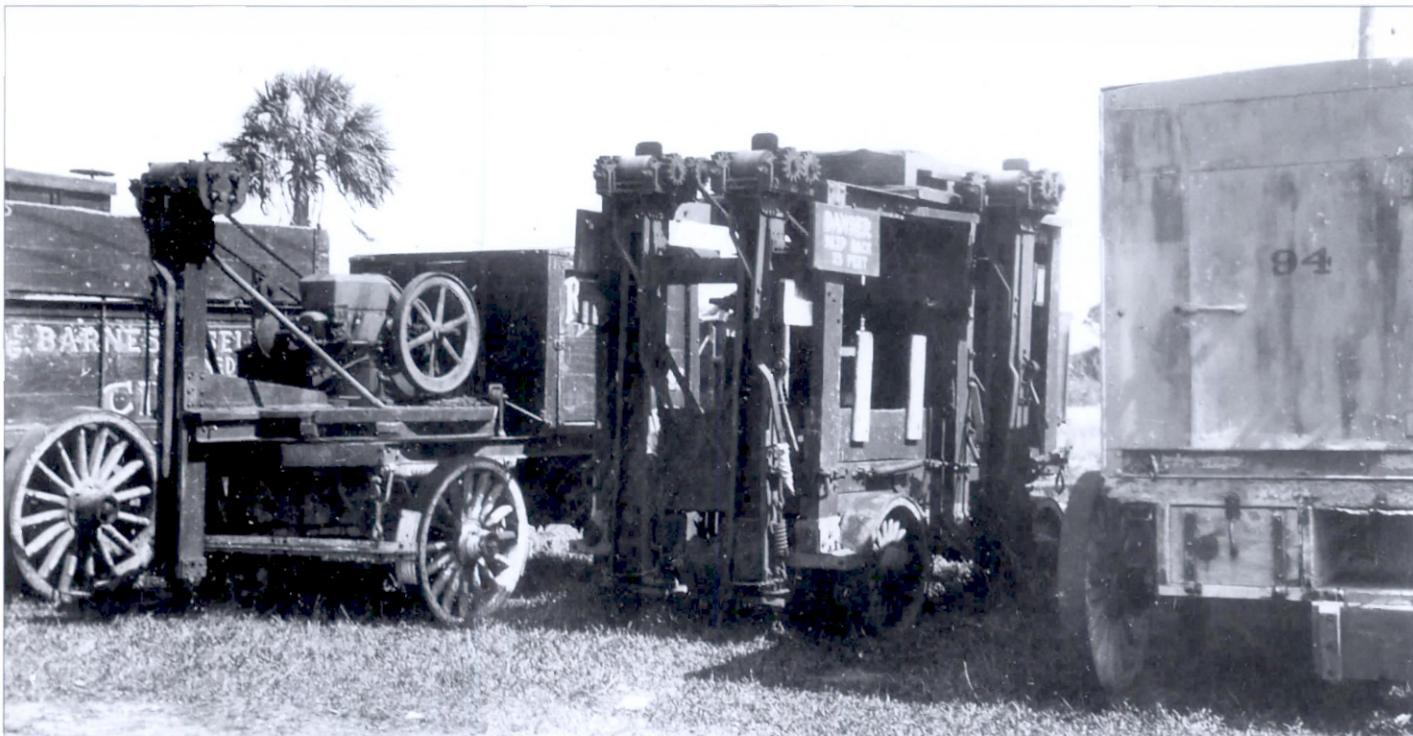


Left page, Dick Anderson's hand-painted cover page for his 1943 journal. Above, March 1943. The practice top at Sarasota Winter Quarters. This was the big top used in 1938 when the show had its strike in Scranton, Pa.

February 19, 1943

Today I went out early to Winter Quarters to take pictures. Looked at the place over and found much old Al G. Barnes – Sells Floto equipment laying around. Didn't practice bars at all, but did practice the single trap and cradle with Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay. Also swung on the fly bar and learned to mount the pedestal board. Thanks to Joe

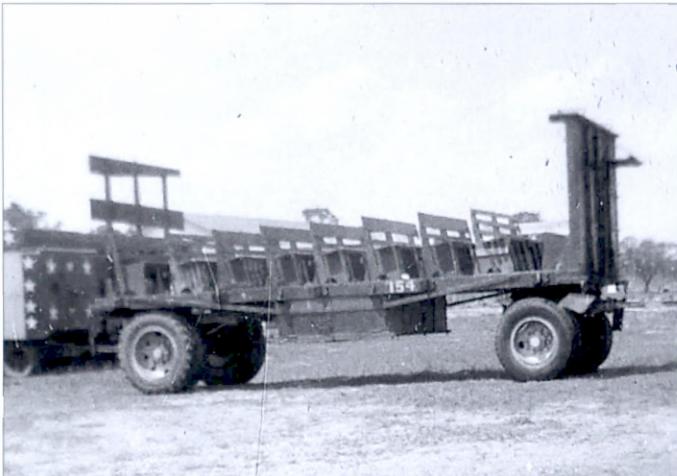
Siegrist. Many of the show folk are arriving now and noticed Ernestine Clarke Jr. and her mother (Elizabeth Hanneford Clarke) are to be with us this year. They were with the Russell Show in 1941 and 1942 with the Cole Show. In the evening Shirley Tremblay and I played a couple of rounds of miniature golf accompanied by a new girl named Addie Corsi. During the day Addie fell from a muscle grind bar and pulled a ligament in her arm so she couldn't play.



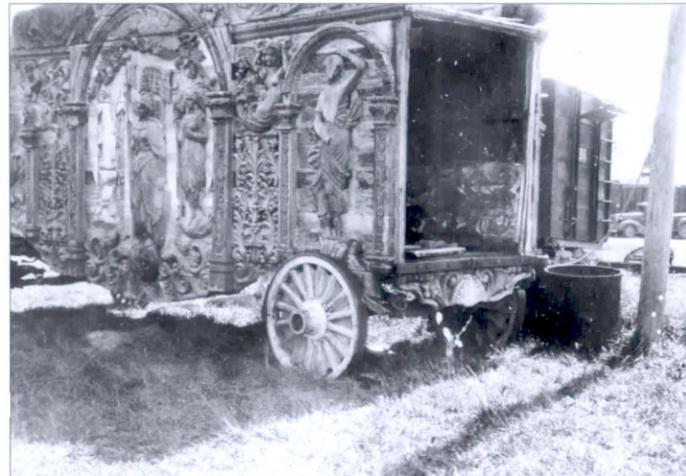
March 4, 1943. More Al G. Barnes – Sells Floto old circus wagons in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters. Stake driving wagons in center of picture and seal wagon on right.



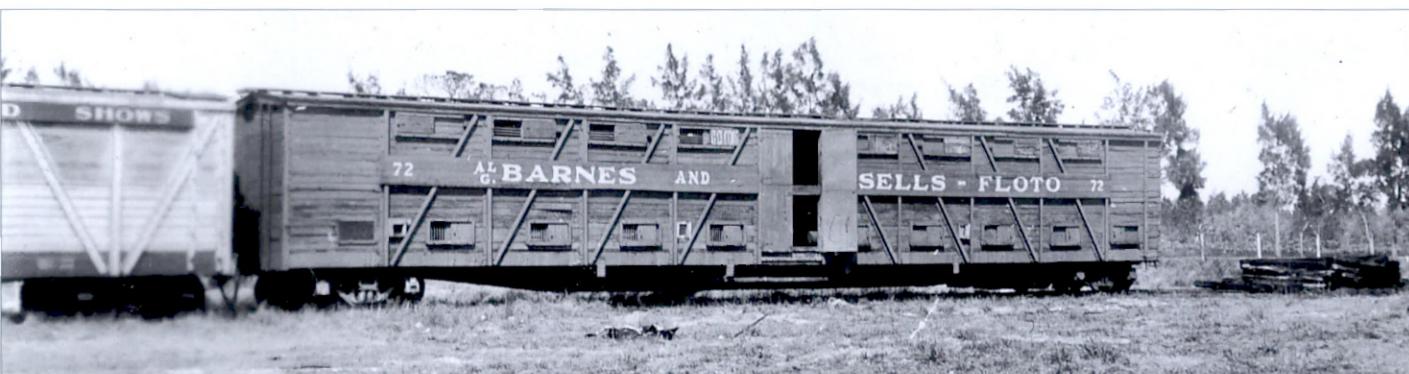
March 4, 1943. Old wagons in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters.



March 30, 1943. This bench wagon was used to take all the performers between town and Winter Quarters this year. Another wagon like it was put behind it thus making a caravan a truck and two wagons we had more fun on these trips.



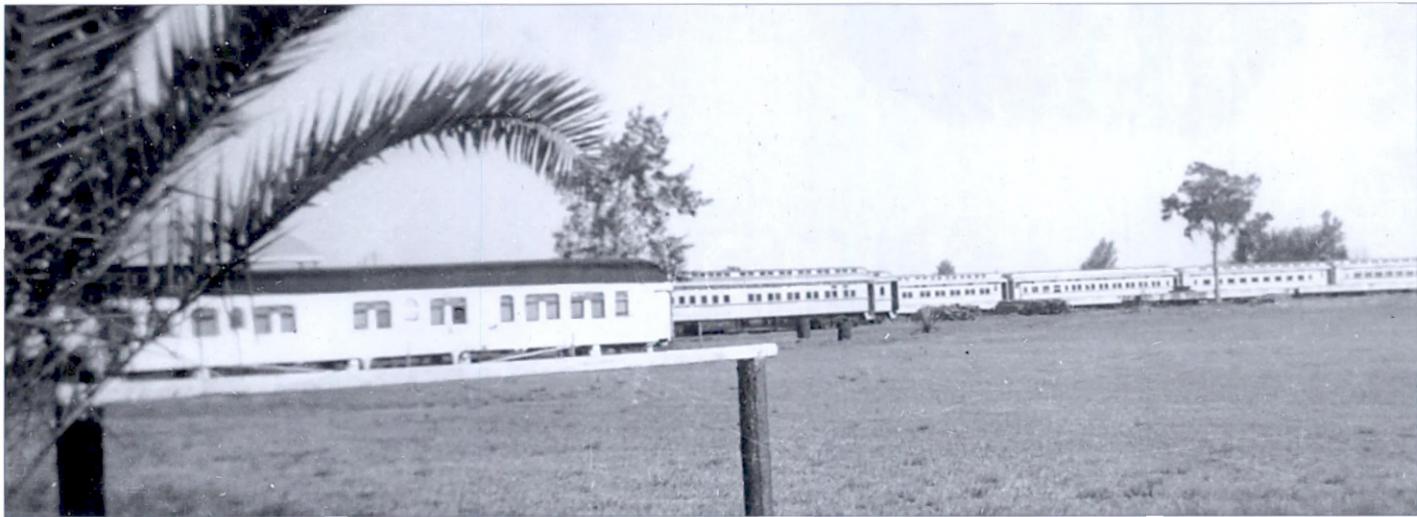
March 4, 1943. The old United States Bandwagon in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters. Used in many old time street parades. Notice the intricate carvings on the sides and sunburst wheels.



March 4, 1943. An old Al G. Barnes - Sells Floto stock car besides one of our stock cars on the railroad yards at Winter Quarters.



March 4, 1943. At Winter Quarters Juanita Mowbry, a new girl, standing beside 73 wagon, which was the clown bandwagon in the 1943 opening spec Hold Your Horses. It is the tank and cage wagon of the pygmy hippopotamus Betsey.



March 1943. Ringling-Barnum Circus Winter Quarters at Sarasota, Florida. The Press Department office is to the left and the railroad yards to the right.

### February 20, 1943

Ran into Shirley this morning so was hooked for a waffle breakfast at Walgreens.<sup>8</sup> Went to Winter Quarters in Art Concello's car and all the Concello gang. Practiced bars, flying and mounting the pedestal board, and also catching. Returned to town in Art Concello's car and attended a stinky cowboy picture at the Ritz Theatre.<sup>9</sup>

### February 21, 1943

Sunday and no work. Went out to the Sarasota Lido Beach today and found it to be really beautiful and very nice. Bill Warner had last year's practice bars erected here so I practiced bars and did a giant swing for the first time since Davenport, Iowa, in 1942. Ripped a good size callous off my hand too. Quite a lot from the show were there and they were, Pete Cristiani, Connie Clausen, Ferdy Wolthing, Aileen Darney, Bob Martin, Betty Jean Tull, Eloise Sprankle, Bernie Pisarski, Bob (Jughead) Kerr, Mario [Marin] and Pete

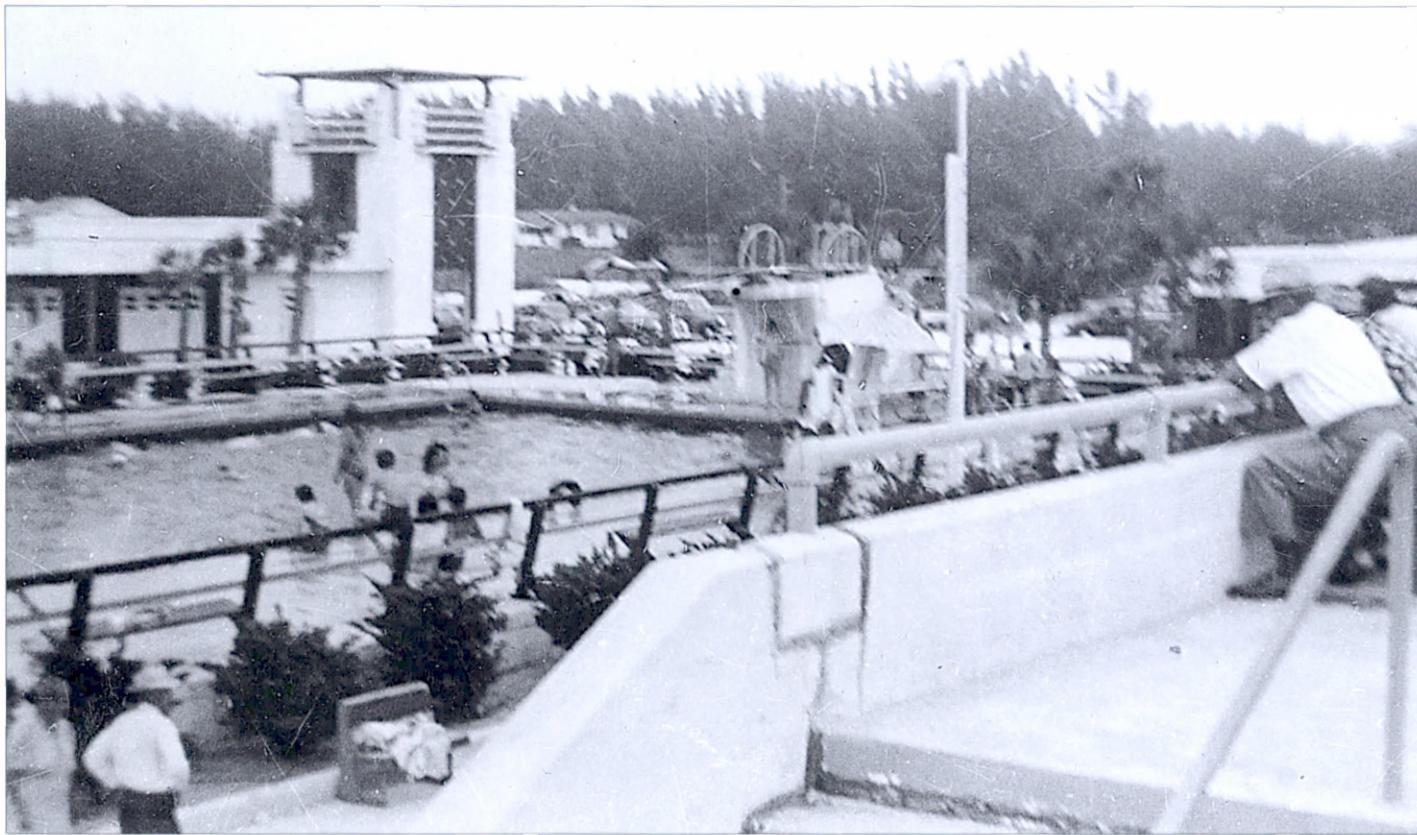
Ivanov, George Bitter, Ann Burak, Massimilliano and Sofia Truzzi, Oscar Marion, Corky and Ortans Cristiani, Dutch Lully,<sup>10</sup> Scotty the Ice Man,<sup>11</sup> and Vander Clyde Barbette<sup>12</sup> and his girlfriend. In the evening went to the Florida Theatre and saw *Commandos Strike at Dawn* with Paul Muni, very good too.

### February 22, 1943

Went out to Winter Quarters, but didn't practice bars, because of my hand. I did practice the single trap and cradle, however, and I caught today in the catch trap. I caught Joe Siegrist, of the famous Siegrist family, for three planges, and two somersaults. Putting him back on the pedestal board each time without a miss. In the evening I ran into Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay and was hooked for a movie. A new girl came in today, Shirley Buehner, she was on the winter dates for the Cole show. Incidentally it rained quite hard all day today.



March 27, 1943. A view of beautiful Sarasota Lido Beach. From left to right is a view of beach cabanas, observation tower, locker room building, casino building housing the casino and different fashion shops. To far right is the Surf Bar and ballroom, behind this is a luncheon bar and more shops, to right of it is more cabanas. Behind the Casino is the beautiful pool and private dressing rooms, observation towers all over the place.



March 1943. The swimming pool at the Sarasota Lido Beach taken from atop the Casino building. Diving tower to right center. In background is an observation tower and private dressing rooms.



March 27, 1943. Bob (Jughead) Kerr and myself on top of the Casino building at the Sarasota Lido Beach.

#### February 23, 1943

At Winter Quarters today I practiced a little on the bars and on the single trap. Accomplishing a pull through ankle drop much to my surprise. Also practiced the flying act. A little before noon Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay, Ernestine Clarke Jr. and myself practiced mounting the pedestal board. In the afternoon I again caught Joe Siegrist on three planges, three somersaults, and returned him to the pedestal board without a miss, I caught Bob Martin on one hocks off and missed him on another, because I had lost my speed of swing. After practice all the Concello group went over to his shop and took down his fair rigging. In the evening I went over to the McVaugh's at the Trailer Camp and later met up with Bernie Pisarski, Bob (Jughead) Kerr, and Bagundi, the Cristiani midget.

#### February 24, 1943

Practiced catching today and continually caught Bob Martin on hocks off and somersault. Missed him once. We would always practice in the morning and Bob Kerr would drop the fly bar for him. In the evening I had a spaghetti dinner at the McVaugh's cooked by Edith. After I left the Trailer Camp I met up with Bob Kerr, Bernie Pisarski, and Addie Corsi playing golf. Later we ran into Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay and Shirley Buehner at Smacks.<sup>13</sup>



March 1943. Robert Ringling our new president and Mrs. Johnston who would play the piano at rehearsals till the band arrived. Picture taken in front of the Dining Hall.

### February 25, 1943

Today John Murray Anderson<sup>14</sup> arrived so everyone had to be at Winter Quarters early. Coming more frequently too is Robert Ringling, successor to John Ringling North. I practiced bars and catching today. Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay would drop the bar for Bob Martin during the morning practice. In the afternoon I caught him for a single somersault with a double swing. After practice all the Concello group went to his shop and finished taking the ridge rope off of one of the nets. Went to the Florida Theatre with Medeia and Zellettia Leininger and saw *Immortal Sergeant* with Henry Fonda.

### February 26, 1943

Went to Winter Quarters this morning, but only helped sit web during web practice. Practiced bars for a while in the afternoon. During flying practice I helped assist Gracie Genders. She was doing a one-and-a-half somersault with a mechanic and I would help her by handing her the fly bar. Mary Jane DeYoung was on the pedestal board too, and she would help by taking the little pedestal board off when Gracie took off. Mary Jane always practiced the flying act with the Genders. John Murray Anderson had the ballet girls practicing all over the big top so we couldn't practice because of the noise we made. When we did practice Bob

Martin did but one trick to me. A hocks off. In the evening, I visited the McVaughns again and when I left they loaded me down with all kinds of fruits. Later I beat Addie Corsi in a game of golf.

### February 27, 1943

Today Bob Martin and I practiced the flying act in the morning with Bob (Jughead) Kerr dropping the fly bar. Now John Murray Anderson has full swing of the big top until four thirty. Then we are able to continue practicing the flying act. After we resume practice I caught Bob Martin on hocks off, somersaults, and pushovers. It was his first time at the push overs, and we made out O.K. In the evening, I went to a dance at the Mira Mar Auditorium with Clayton (Chittlins) Chase. There we danced with Margy Naitto, June DeYoung, and Mary Jane DeYoung. Some of the Cristianis were there too and by the way Chittlins sang a solo. He happens to be a midget.

### February 28, 1943

Today was Sunday and played a game of golf with Shirley Buehner was at the Villa Goodrich Hotel<sup>15</sup> when Betty Nitsch arrived so I acted gallant and carried her suitcases upstairs for her. Sucker Anderson every time. In the afternoon Shirley Buehner and I went in the El Tropical Club<sup>16</sup>



March 1943. Vander Clyde Barbette, director of the aerial ballet. In background is the practice top and to the right is the seat department building. Roy and Nits Deisher in the background, trapezist.

and then to the Club Manhattan.<sup>17</sup> Afterwards we went out to the Sarasota Lido Beach with Dubois (Dude) Rhodus, Bob Martin, Bob (Jughead) Kerr, and Bernie Pisarski, others we met out there were Ann Burak, Marie Ivanov, Patty Patite Warfield, Vander Clyde Barbette, Lauretta (Mrs. Niks) Jefferson,<sup>18</sup> and John Murray Anderson. In the evening visited the McVaugh's at the trailer park and later met Ogden Baker, second Lieutenant at the Sarasota Air Base. Met up with him at Walgreens. Harry Dann came into town today. Bill Warner and Eddie Kohl also came into town from Savannah, Georgia where they played an American Legion date with Walter Guice and his bar act.

### March 1, 1943

This morning I practiced catching and caught Eddie Kohl for the first time on half turns first time for them too. In the afternoon we practiced on the bars and went out to the Sarasota Lido to take down the practice bars out there. In the evening went to the Florida Theatre and saw *For Me and My Gal* with Judy Garland.

### March 2, 1942

Practiced catching in the morning and also in the afternoon as has been the past weeks. Caught Eddie Kohl on some half turns and Bob Martin on some hocks off. Also in



March 23, 1943. Dorothy (Dot) Donahue on the lawn of the Villa Goodrich Hotel in Sarasota. She is a new girl that joined out this year and later appeared in *Spangles*.

the afternoon I practiced on the bars doing quite a bit with the mechanic on. What I was practicing was seat jumps, giant swings, feet and hands, and one arm straight jumps. Went over to the McVaugh's again and had to apologize to Edith and a friend of hers. They came out to the Quarters today and were refused admission, however I got them a pass signed by Miss Jane Johnson<sup>19</sup> for George Washington Smith. It began to rain quite hard so Edith took me as far as Smacks where I bounced into Bob (Jughead) Kerr, Pete Ivanov, Bernie Pisarski, Sally Hobson a little English girl new on the show this year, and Medeia and Zelettia Leininger, and Addie Corsi and Shirley Buehner. All of us left Smacks sopping wet, because down there it really rains.

### March 3, 1943

It was very cold and wet today making rehearsals quite discomforting. Because of the weather we didn't practice the flying act at all and very little on the bars. But we did practice the web and marching of the web. Went over to the trailer camp to give Edith the pass. Later I saw *Reveille* with Beverly at the Florida Theatre with Ann Miller.

### March 4, 1943

Very cold and miserable again today. Fire was made in an old oil drum in the big top. Rehearsed web and marching

of web. A man from Warner Bros. Pictures took pictures of us today practicing the bars. Did nothing out of the ordinary today, but tried a cut-a-way. After John Murray Anderson was finished rehearsing finale one of the Loyal-Repensky girl's horse got out of control and was running wildly around the big top. No one got hurt though. We weren't able to practice the flying act till a quarter after seven. I caught Bill Warner for a somersault and missed him on another and also caught Eddie Kohl a few times. Eddie Kohl also tried some doubles to me, but missed every one, we couldn't get together on them. Art Concetto was directing us and said everything was fine in spite of the outcome.

### March 5, 1943

Practiced catching in the morning today and caught Eddie Kohl and Bob Martin. In the afternoon we rehearsed the web and web marching. Also practiced the bars. Edith and her friend Grace came out to Winter Quarters today. Practiced catching in the afternoon. Eddie Kohl tried some more doubles to me and I almost caught the first one. Visited the McVaughns in the evening.

### March 6, 1943

Today it rained the full course of the day and made things quite miserable at Winter Quarters. Didn't practice anything, but finale, web and web marching, swung on the fly bar a few times and mount the pedestal board. Went to the Florida Theatre in the evening and saw *Reunion in France* with Joan Crawford.

### March 7, 1943

Sunday and the morning was very unpleasant. It rained the first part of the day and rehearsals were called off which were supposed to have been held today, though it was Sunday. Didn't do anything except go to a couple of movies and towards evening it began to clear up.

### March 8, 1943

In the morning, which finally turned out nice, I did some web sitting. In the afternoon we rehearsed the web and web marching. During the bar practice I broke one of them, like I did in Chicago, Ill., last year. I was doing a foot circle when it happened, and landed on my can so everything was O.K. While practicing catching again I almost caught Eddie Kohl's double, and did catch Bill Warner on a cutaway to the stick.<sup>20</sup> In the evening I went over to the Trailer Park to say so long to Edith. She leaves tomorrow on the Silver Meteor.<sup>21</sup>

### March 9, 1943

Beautiful day today and in the morning I caught Bob Martin with Bob (Jughead) Kerr dropping the flybar. Sat for

"web" in the morning and in the afternoon practiced marching for web and finale. Also in the afternoon some of the costumes to be used this year were modeled and they look very nice. Didn't practice bars today because of the accident yesterday. Did practice flying act later with Eddie Kohl, and Bill Warner, and Bob Martin. Eddie Kohl's double was the closest yet and caught Bill Warner on more cutaways to the stick, and Bob Martin on somersaults and hocks off. John Murray Anderson is in the habit of giving everyone on the show a nickname and mine happens to be "star." Also was placed as a barker or peanut vender in opening spec Hold Your Horses.

### March 10, 1943

In the morning practiced the flying act a little, catching Bob Martin with Bob (Jughead) Kerr dropping the fly bar. Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay swung on the fly bar a little too. Sat for web of course and in the afternoon practiced marching for web, finale, also went through the bar routines and catching later on. Came close again on Eddie Kohl's double. Caught Bob Martin on a lot of planges and somersault. Also Bill Warner's cut aways to the stick. In the evening went over to the Army and Navy Club at the Sarasota Auditorium.<sup>22</sup> There a program was put on



March 1943. Outside of the Dining Hall during lunch hour. The three chickens are Patty LaMaire, Media Leininger, and Shirley Beahner, all of the ballet.

by JoAnne Siegrist playing the flute, Medeia and Zelettia Leininger did individual dance numbers and Addie Corsi did a very good contortion number. Colonel Asp<sup>23</sup> of Drew Field at Tampa<sup>24</sup> showed color films of the show from 1940 to 1942.

### March 11, 1943

Practiced the usual show numbers today and PIC magazine took photos of rehearsals this past week. Also took some while show was in New York and my picture in finale was in the magazine. John Murray Anderson had his picture taken with a bunch of gals grouped around one of the elephants. Practiced bars today too. Eddie Kohl tried more doubles in the flying act practice and caught Bill Warner on a feet across. Caught Bob Martin on somersaults as well as the others. In the evening I went to the Florida Theatre and saw *Star Spangled Rhythm* with Bing Crosby. Accompanied by Addie Corsi, Clayton (Chitlins) Chase, and Zelettia Leininger.

### March 12, 1943

Practiced the flying first thing in the morning with Bob Martin and again at noon with Bill Warner and Eddie Kohl. Did the usual show numbers during the first part of the afternoon. In the late afternoon and evening Eddie Kohl, Bill Warner and I went up to Drew Field at Tampa to take part in a show opening & new band shell at the field. We did the bar act in the program. Paul Jerome rode in the same car with us that was sent down to pick us up. We had a dinner in the service club and after the show was put on we had a dance and party in the Officers Club. We had a swell time and the following morning I woke up with a hangover. John Murray Anderson called me "Hangover" all day. Acts taking part in the show were Paul Horompo, midget who sang and yodeled, our bar act, billed as the Ainsworth Brothers, Pappa Yu Naittos dogs, The Naittos Sister wire act, Alfonso Loyal juggling, the Wallendas highwire, three girls working the webs as the Webster Sisters, they were Eloise Sprinkle, Dolly Jahn Copeland, Patty Warfield, their web sitters were Victoria Torrance, Kitty Clark, and Lou Jacobs, who also clowned with Justine Loyal, Joe Wallenda also clowned and Paul Jerome announced. Agnes Oliver, of the former act Oliver Sisters and Louis, did an acrobatic act.

### March 13, 1943

As I said before John Murray Anderson greeted me by calling me "Hangover," and I really didn't feel much like doing anything today. Bob Martin, Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay, and myself swung on the fly bar several times. Rehearsed all show numbers. We put the bars up after they came back from Tampa. When we practiced the flying act in the afternoon I caught Eddie Kohl, Bill Warner, and Art Concello. I caught Art for a straight jump and somersault. Caught Bill Warner for a cutaway and he slipped off the second one landing way

up in the apron<sup>25</sup> – "summer home." The second one he did he almost missed, but held on. Art went up to see how I was doing and said everything was just fine.

### March 14, 1943

Sunday, because rehearsals have been going along so well they have been called off for today so most everyone went out to the Sarasota Lido Beach. The day was very hot and I came home with a serious sunburn. I spent the evening with Addie Corsi playing golf and saw Casablanca with Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart.

### March 15, 1943

This morning all I did was sit for web and just show rehearsals. My sunburn was too much and most everyone suffered. In the afternoon practiced bars and concentrated on my run ups. The sensational happened in flying act practice. I caught Eddie Kohl on his doubles, not once but twice in a row. We were both so surprised both times that I couldn't put him back on the pedestal board. Also caught Bill Warner and Bob Martin on tricks too. In the evening didn't do anything but hang around Walgreens all evening and Ferdy Wolthing took me home in his car.



March 4, 1943. Juanita Mowbry, a new girl on our practice bars outside the practice top in the background at Winter Quarters. This top was the one used in 1938 when the show closed at Scranton, Pennsylvania because of a strike right after the season got under way.



March 1943. Patty LaMaire outside of the practice top. She is an excellent figure skater and has received many laurels. Her grandmother Nellie Donegan has the roller skating act on the show.

### March 16, 1943

This morning just sat for web and practiced the bars a little. During the lunch hour Frank Shepherd fell while practicing the flying act. He was somewhat hurt and taken to the hospital. Also during lunch hour I walked over to the camel barn and saw the camels and zebras that are replacing those lost in the menagerie fire at Cleveland last year. One is a baby camel born on the way from the Goebel's animal farm<sup>26</sup> in California where they were bought. Bernie Pisarski was along. After lunch both specs, finale, and web were rehearsed along with the elephant number. A[Art?] accomplished the feet and hands across today without the aid of the mechanic. Also I did a somersault, or fly away. During practice of the flying act I missed Eddie Kohl's doubles although they were close. So close I wore a hicky on my forehead for about a week afterwards. Caught Bob Martin and Bill Warner on tricks too, Bill tried a double, but didn't come close.

### March 17, 1943

St. Patrick's Day and we had lime Jello in cook house today for dessert. Rehearsed all show numbers today and only swung a little on the bars. In the flying act practice I caught Eddie Kohl's doubles again twice in succession. Making four catches all together now. Today, I put him back on



March 1943. Florence Walsh and the baby puma. She was formerly in Helzapoppin, Artists and Models, and later the Ringling owned Spangles.

the pedestal board as well as make the catch. In the evening Pete Ivanov, Bernie Pisarski, and I went to the Tropical Club and later Bernie and I played golf. I made the game in 37 (par 44) with three hole in ones.

### March 18, 1943

My 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The usual rehearsals today and bar practice was very good. Frank Shepherd came back today and I gave him a rub down on his shoulder which was still sore. During flying act practice Eddie Kohl and I couldn't get together on his doubles, but caught other tricks, and Bill Warner and Bob Martin. In the evening Bernie Pisarski and I attended the Army and Navy Club at the Sarasota Civic Auditorium. The program consisted of gals from the show modeling clothes, some of the gals doing dances and acrobatic numbers. Ardely on her trapeze, and some soldier entertainers from Drew Field up in Tampa. Later Bernie and I accompanied Judy Huttson home. One of the new gals on the show that did some modeling in the program.

### March 19, 1943

Still receiving birthday cards from Mom and the folks back home. We rehearsed the usual show numbers and bar

practice was quite satisfactory. During flying act practice two of Eddie Kohl's doubles were caught, but I couldn't hold them. In the evening all the Concello group went over to Concello's shop and began putting a new ridge rope on another net.

### March 20, 1943

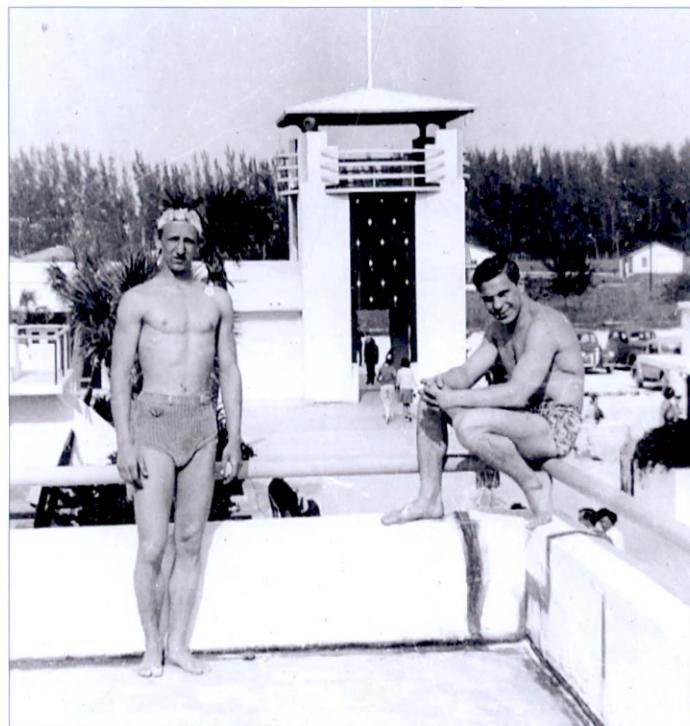
Did the usual rehearsals today and at noon took a good look at the hippopotamuses. Old Lotus actually opened her cavernous mouth. During bar practice I did a run up and feet and hands across together. Almost caught Eddie Kohl's double, but the flying act practice had to be curtailed when my hocks began to bleed from so much catching. In the evening, Bernie Pisarski, Al Dahlgren, and I went out together.

### March 21, 1943

Sunday and no work so everyone over to the Sarasota Lido Beach. Bernie and [I] delved into a long and interesting conversation with John Murray Anderson, Samuel Gumpertz, who formerly managed the show when John Ringling died, was there in his own private cabana. Today I again got a terrible burn, worse than last weeks. In the evening Bernie and I went to a show.



March 1943. John Murray Anderson, myself and Bernie Pisarski at the Sarasota Lido Beach. John Murray Anderson is the celebrated stager and director of our show for 1942 and 1943. He also put on Jumbo several years ago, all the shows at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe and currently the Zeigfeld Follies.



March 27, 1943. Bernie Pisarski and myself on top of the Casino building at the Sarasota Lido Beach. Diving tower of pool to left in background.



March 27, 1943. Juanita Mowbry, a new girl, on a cement sea horse on top of the Casino building at the Sarasota Lido Beach. Building was beautifully painted in all light shades of color.



March 23, 1943. Bernie Pisarski and myself at the Sarasota Lido Beach. The beautiful swimming pool is in the background with private cabanas and observation towers.

### March 22, 1943

Rehearsed as usual show numbers today and was unable to practice the bars or flying act today, because my sunburn had blistered. In the evening all the Concello group went over to his shop to work further on the net. Later Bernie Pisarski and I went to Smacks for a hamburger.

### March 23, 1943

Though I was still badly blistered I went out to Winter Quarters just the same. Did the usual show rehearsals. In the meantime since winter rehearsals have begun the band has returned. Last year the band quit in Philadelphia. In the afternoon I practiced bars and skinned a lot of the blisters on my back once when I fell against a guy wire. Also practiced the flying act catching Eddie Kohl, Bill Warner, Bob Martin and Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay for the first time. She is the first gal I ever caught and I'm the only catcher she ever went to except Eddie Ward. She did "crabs" to me, but missed her every time, because she was too early. However I did catch her and put her back on the pedestal board. In the evening we all went over to the shop again and worked on the net.

### March 24, 1943

Usual show rehearsals today and Frank Shepard is well again and practicing his single trap. Lalage appeared in the

"top" today. She is the lady replacing Elly Ardely for the aerial ballet. Practice bars and John Murray Anderson came over as usual for his daily chat. During flying act practice caught Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay three times and put her back on the pedestal board every time. One trick she did was a feet across. Eddie Kohl tried a couple of doubles, but only came close. Bill Warner and Bob Martin also did tricks to me. In the evening all the Concello Group went over to the shop in preparations of getting ready to move. John Ringling North is always there waiting for Art and has spoken to me many times. He also is a constant visitor to Winter Quarters.

### March 25, 1943

Usual show rehearsals today except Lalage did her act during the web number. This morning Eddie Kohl left for the army. Practiced bars today as well as the flying act. Only Bill Warner, Bob Martin, and Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay are doing tricks to me now. A miraculous catch was made on Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay's feet across today. I had to catch her feet by my hands, almost my thumbs, because she was so late in leaving the board. Art and all others that saw it gave me much praise on making the catch. In the evening we all went to the shop for further preparation in moving.

### March 26, 1943

Usual show rehearsals today and did good in the bar act practice. Nothing out of the ordinary in the flying act practice, though it was very dark while we were practicing. In the evening of course we went over to the shop for more work.

### March 27, 1943

Today was the last day of rehearsals prior to the New York rehearsals. Practiced the bar act and flying act in the afternoon catching Bill Warner and Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay. After practice we all stayed and packed the rigging away. In the evening Bernie Pisarski and I went into the Manhattan Club where we met up with the gang from the show. Afterwards Bernie Pisarski, Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay, and I went over to the Tropical Club and I had a dance with Elly Ardely. Incidentally I rode out to Winter Quarters today with Elly Ardely and Massimilliano Truzzi. Yesterday Theo Nelson Marlowe picked Florence Walsh, a new show girl, and I up and took us to Winter Quarters.

### March 28, 1943

This was Sunday and a very dull one. We were supposed to go out to Winter Quarters to work, but no one picked us up. So the day was spent packing my trunk and waiting for it to be picked up. In the evening Bernie Pisarski and I went to the Florida Theatre and saw Andy Hardy's *Double Troubles* with Mickey Rooney.

### March 29, 1943

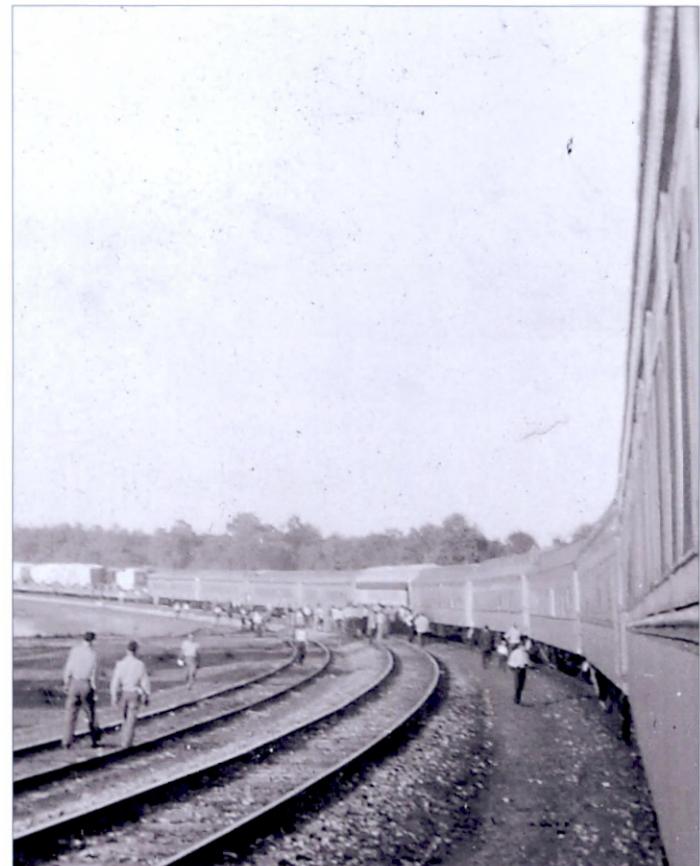
Went to Winter Quarters and took photos of everything I thought I should take. As far as I know and from what I know I have the first pictures taken of the new Liberty bandwagon used with the 1943 opening spec Hold Your Horses. The photographer was there and is in most of my pictures of the wagon. In the afternoon helped the Concello gang move things out to the cars at Winter Quarters. Didn't do anything in the evening. Incidentally while in the Tropical Club Saturday night we came across Lauretta (Mrs. Niks) Jefferson, who directed the choreography in the show this year. Mrs. Niks is the name bestowed by John Murray Anderson on her.

### March 30, 1943

In the morning, Bernie Pisarski and I went out to the Sarasota Lido Beach for the last swim and sunburn. Later we met up with Sally Hobson, an English girl this year new on the show. In the afternoon I returned to town and helped the Concello gang move things from his old shop to his present shop. First in the evening I went out to the Trailer Park and gave my farewells to the McVaughns and friends. Later Bernie Pisarski and went over to Art and Antoinette Concello's home in Cherokee Park where a party was held for the new season. All those attending were Art and Tony Concello, John Ringling North, Joe and Beebe Siegrist, Ernestine Clarke Jr., Mrs. Clarke (Elizabeth Haneford), JoAnne Siegrist, Mr. and Mrs. Pat Valdo, Fanny McClosky and husband, Agnes and Mary Oliver, Merle Evans and wife, Ekhart Lawson, Jack Tavlin, Shirley (Shrimp) Tremblay, Mary Jane and June DeYoung, Bill Warner, Ben Mason, Bob (Jughead) Kerr, DuBois (Dude) Rhodos, Bob Martin, Al Dahlgren, Joyce Fay, Roy and Nits Deisler, Bernie Pisarski, and myself. What a time.

### April 4, 1943

Practice and rehearsals are now over and the show is in New York's Madison Square Garden. The day we pulled out of Sarasota we pulled out with newlyweds, Eloise Sprankle and Dude Rhodus. Colonel Asp of Drew Field at Tampa and his photographers were there to see us off and the priest<sup>27</sup> at St. Martha's Catholic Church<sup>28</sup> gave blessings on the trains. Incidentally a new stain glass window in the church was dedicated to the show. As the trains pulled through town all of Sarasota was there to see us off and cheering and waving goodbyes. The trip was alright coming up, taking us three days in all. We stopped at Florence, North Carolina for watering and feeding for six hours, and again in Alexandria, Virginia. There I telephoned home and found it to be mom's birthday. When pulling out of Alexandria something was wrong with the engineer, because our cars were continually being terribly jolted enough to cause accidents inside of the



April 1, 1943. In northern Florida or southern Georgia on the trip from Sarasota Winter Quarters to opening day in Madison Square Garden, New York. We stopped here to get our "dukee" boxes and coffee.



March 1943. On the trip to New York from Sarasota Winter Quarters we stopped here in Florida for eats. Standing in doorway is Mary Oliver and Bernice (Powers) Peck. Standing on the track is Judy Hutson, Mary Miller, Lawrence (Jocko) Montgomery, myself, and Helaine Parker.



March 1943. Mary Miller and Patty LaMaire on the cars. This was taken while the cars were being repaired that broke.



April 5, 1943. This is a very old ticket wagon of the Ringling Bros. Circus used as a War Bond ticket admission booth in Times Square, New York for the show in 1943.



April 5, 1943. Billboard in Times Square, New York with a Gargantua and M'Toto poster on it. New York at last after the hectic trip from Sarasota Winter Quarters.



April 5, 1943. Looking up 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the marquee at Madison Square Garden, New York, announcing the opening of the show April 9<sup>th</sup>. A Red Cross Benefit was to be put on before we opened.

cars. We passed Wilmington at 2:30 in the early morning. When we arrived in New York we immediately got located<sup>29</sup> and then I went home to Wilmington for the weekend. Boy was I glad to get home after that trip. When I returned to New York on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April I immediately went over to Brooks and Eaves Costumers for my fittings and also to the LaRay Boot Shop. In the afternoon Ray Parata, Bernie Pisarski and I went to the Roxy Theatre, and later to the Loews State Theatre. At the Garden a Red Cross Benefit show was being given so no rehearsals till tomorrow. Half of Hollywood took part in the show.

This completes the book of Winter Quarters and following is also a book of the 1943 season with accompanying photos. **BW**

### Annotations by Deborah W. Walk

1. City Trailer Park was located at South Lime at Ringling Boulevard in Sarasota.
2. Now 6<sup>th</sup> Street.
3. Morgan D. Taylor was the owner/manager of Georgia Produce House in 1940 and later a registered real estate broker.
4. Possibly John M. McVaugh of Millcreek, New Castle, DE, wife Edith and daughter Edith, who was 12 in 1930 census.
5. Entrance located at East 18<sup>th</sup> Street (now 12<sup>th</sup> Street) and Beneva.
6. For the release, the flyer swings out with hands close together. At the front end, they lift their legs up and around the bar and hook them on, with head tucked in. Once they swing back to the front end again, they release in two movements; first unfolding the body (letting go of the bar) so their chest rises towards the sky, and then releasing their legs.
7. Located at 61 North Pineapple Avenue.
8. Located at 1500 Main Street, at the intersection with Lemon. Now Brooks Brothers.
9. The theater opened as the Virginia in 1916, then Sarasota Theatre, then Kress Theatre. The building which was located on Main Street across from the Kress building was demolished ca. 1970.
10. Frank Luley
11. James (Scotty) Horsburgh worked the Miller Brothers Concessions.
12. Barrette was the Aerial Director for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.
13. Located at 751 Main Street in Sarasota.
14. The 1943 Ringling program describes him as the "Internationally Famed Director who staged the Magnificent 1943 Spectacle for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus."
15. Located at 195 Goodrich Avenue.
16. 221 Main Street.
17. 234 Main Street.
18. Lauretta Jefferson was the Choreographer for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.
19. Secretary to the President of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows.
20. To perform a cutaway, the flyer swings out and turns around at the front end. Over the platform, they bring their feet up in

front and place them against the bar. Before reaching the peak at the front end, the flyer 'breaks' from the folded position and sweeps their legs back until they are above their head and their body has risen over the bar. They let go of the bar and continue the front somersault in a straight position until they can grab the catcher's stick in front of them.

21. Billed by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad as the "Train of Tomorrow" when introduced in 1939.
22. Located at 801 North Tamiami Trail.
23. Colonel M. B. Asp (1893-1964) was the commanding officer of Drew Field. A native of Tampa, he was an "ardent circus fan."
24. Drew Field was Tampa's first airport and was used by the US Air Force during World War II because MacDill Field runways had not been completed.
25. The aprons are the parts of the net at either end of the rig that curve upwards.
26. Jungleland located in Thousand Oaks CA.
27. Likely Charles L. Eislander.
28. Located at 200 North Orange Avenue.
29. Performers stayed at the Hotel Belvedere, 319 West 48th Street, NYC – right across the street from Madison Square Garden.



March 1943. Sign post on the corner of the Sarasota Terrace Hotel property.

March 7, 1943

Sunday and the morning was very unpleasant. It rained the first part of the day and rehearsals were called off which were supposed to have been held today, thought it was Sunday. Didn't do anything except go to a couple of movies and towards evening it began to clear up.

March 8, 1943

In the morning, which ~~had~~ finally turned out nice, I did some "web" sitting. In the afternoon we rehearsed the "web" and "web-marching". During the bar practice I broke one of them, like I did in Chicago, Ill. Last ~~night~~ year. I was doing a "foot circle" when it happened, and landed on my "cdn" so everything was out. While practicing catching again I almost caught Eddie Kohl's "double", and did catch Bill Warner on a "cutaway to the stick". In the evening went over to the trailer park to stay soloing to Edith. She leaves tomorrow on the Silver Meteor.

March 9, 1943

Beautiful day today and in the

24



March 30, 1943

this is the poleless tent housing the two gorillas, Gargantua and his mate Toto. their air conditioned cage can be seen beneath it. This tent acted as preview at the big top of tomorrow.



March 30, 1943

This is the wood mill at winter quarters.



March 30, 1943

This is the building housing all blues (breacher seats), bible-backs (chair stands), jacks, and stringers (chair stands supports).

25

# Sarasota Winter Quarters

## March 30, 1943

*photos and captions from Dick Anderson*

In March of 1943 aerialist Dick Anderson spent one morning "taking photos of everything [he] thought [he] should take." His entry indicates that he took the photos on March 29<sup>th</sup>, but in the pages of the journal, all of the images are labeled with the date March 30th. No matter which day,

these photographs are a unique record of Winter Quarters through the eyes of a performer who practiced there day in and day out for two months prior to the beginning of the 1943 Season. The accompanying captions provide Anderson's own interpretation of the images and their importance.



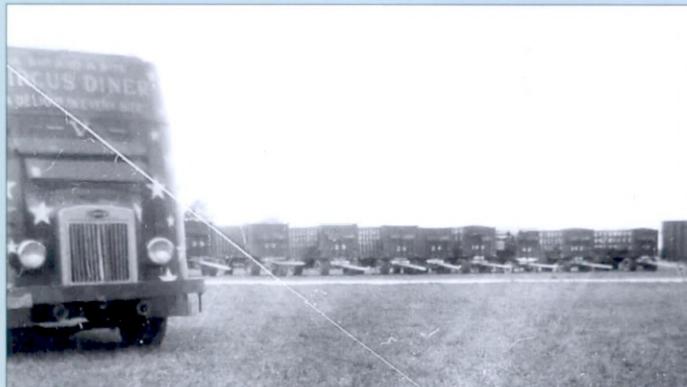
*The Seaboard Airline Railway at Sarasota, Florida Winter Quarters of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined circus. Picture taken on the corner of Walgreens.*



*Billboard sign outside of Sarasota on the way to the Winter Quarters. Picture taken from the back of Art Concello's truck when we moved things to the cars.*



Entrance to the Winter Quarters. Taken from the candy stand across the road. Bernie Pisarski is the figure on the left.



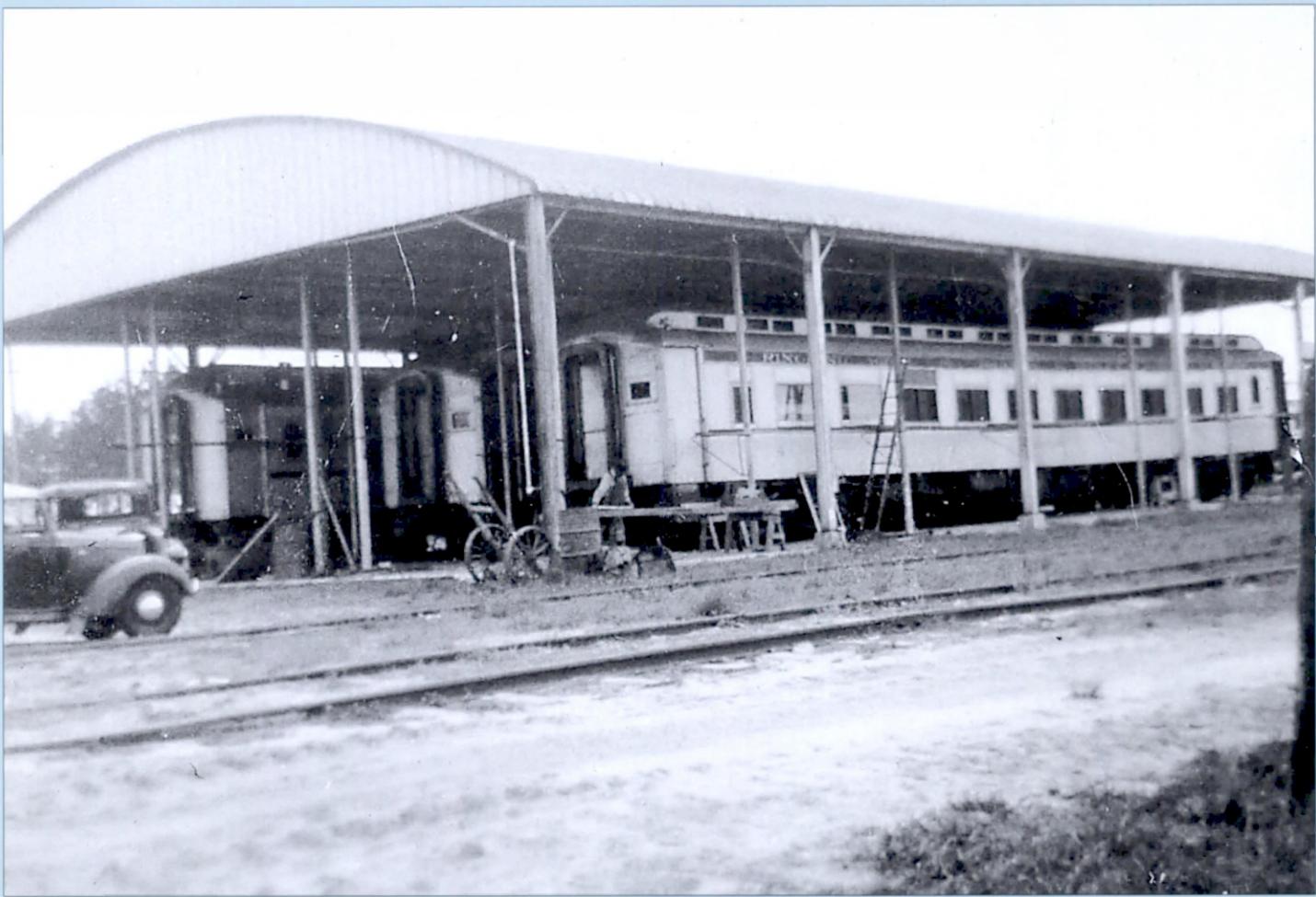
This is the wagon line up waiting for the paint shop. Some of these wagons go with the show to the Garden and others meet the show under canvas. This year being Philadelphia; last year it was Baltimore. On immediate left is the huge midway diner.



On the left half of this building is the car shop and on the right side is the paint shop. In the rear behind this building is the chair department and shop.



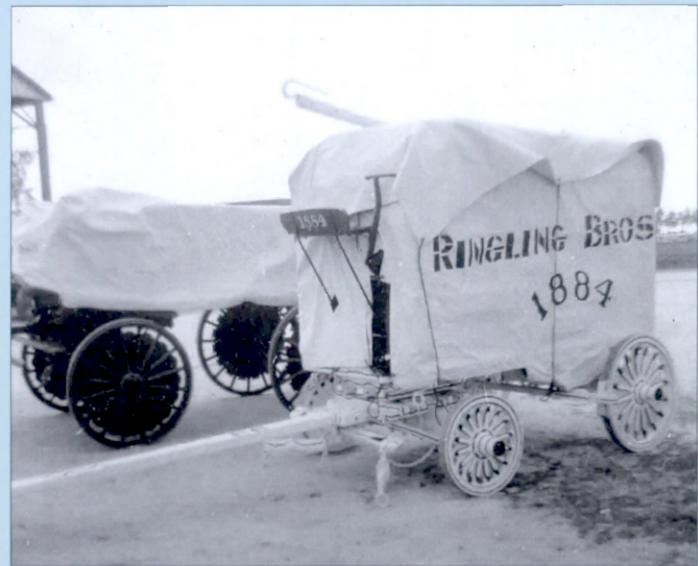
This old railroad car is the press department office in Winter Quarters. Roland Butler, Allen Lester, and others have their desks here.



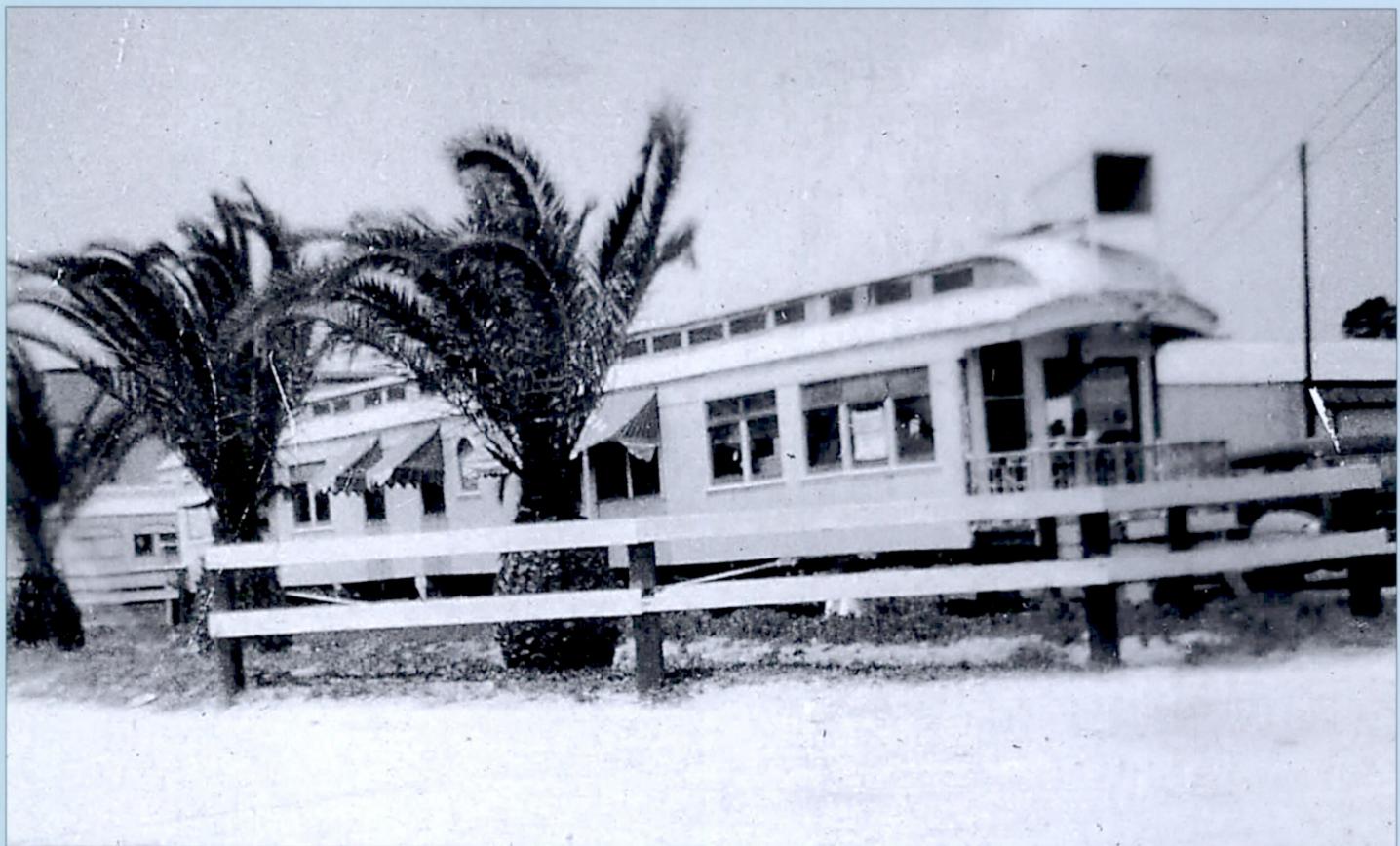
Railroad car repair shed at Winter Quarters. Car on the right is car 84 occupied by Robert Ringling, Mrs. Charles Ringling, Mrs. Aubrey Ringling, and Mr. Haley in 1943 season. John Ringling North's car, the Jomar, is in the yards behind this shed.



This old railroad car is the train department office at Winter Quarters. Beside the office can be seen one of the floats during repairs and in the background is the car and paint shops building.



Two wagons used in 1943 for opening spec Hold Your Horses. The one with 1884 on it is a very, very old pony wagon. 1884 is when the Ringling Bros. began their circus. The other wagon is the patrol wagon also used in the fire house gag during the 1943 show. [Note the wagon marked 1884 was the Anniversary wagon, built in 1933.]



*This old railroad car is the main office of the Winter Quarter. The poster in the window is advertising the opening of the show for April 19<sup>th</sup> in Madison Square Garden.*



*The wagon is an old Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto wagon under the chair shed at Winter Quarters.*



*This is the properties department building at Winter Quarters housing pulleys, blocks, and similar materials for the tents, riggings, and etc.*



*Paint department building at Winter Quarters. In background is the planking used on the flat cars.*



*Electrical department building at Winter Quarters.*



*Lumber shed building at Winter Quarters.*



*Pullman supply building. Here is kept all bed linens, blankets, mattresses, etc., for the Pullman cars while the show is off the road.*



*Harness department building where new harness is made, old repaired, and all unused harness stored.*



*Truck department's garage where the tractors are kept in storage and all motorized equipment repaired.*



(Top) Dining Hall at Winter Quarters. It was very nice and was aside from the main part of the quarters. Robert Ringling would play Enrico Caruso recordings during lunch.

(Above left) Lunch is about to be served at the Dining Hall. I believe figure to the far right is that of DuBois (Dude) Rhodus, trapezist.

(Left) View looking from the veranda of the Dining Hall at Winter Quarters.

(Above right) Giraffe House in front and the Bear House on the left of this building. The other end of this building is the properties department.



(Left) The Monkey House and Island in front surrounding the island was a moat in which swam the pygmy hippopotamus of the show's menagerie.

(Below) Monkey House opposite side of building as above. Building behind it is the harness department building.



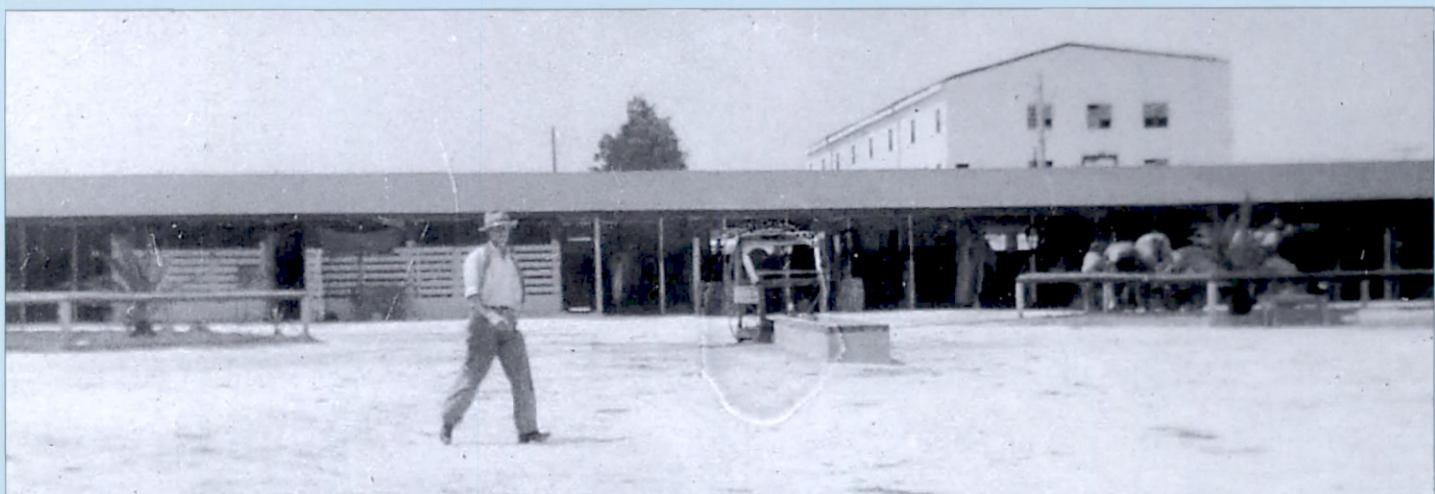
This is the largest and the main building in the Winter Quarters. The first floor is devoted to the menagerie, on the second floor is where the tents are made, and also the accounting dept. On a balcony surrounding the second floor is the wardrobe dept. and storage. Outside cages are attached to this building which houses only caged animals.



Menagerie building showing outside cages. Looking from the Monkey House.



Menagerie building looking from the old wagon graveyard.



Menagerie building in the background. Looking across the performing horse stables.



Looking from second floor of menagerie building towards entrance to Winter Quarters. In the picture is the Two Jesters (red) Calliope, formerly of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus & trunk wagon, the main office, train dept. office, electrical dept. building, paint dept. building, and building of the car and paint shed.



Looking from second floor of menagerie building south. In bottom left is the top of panther outside cage, a very old wagon, and the railroad yards. John Ringling's car is here and many others.



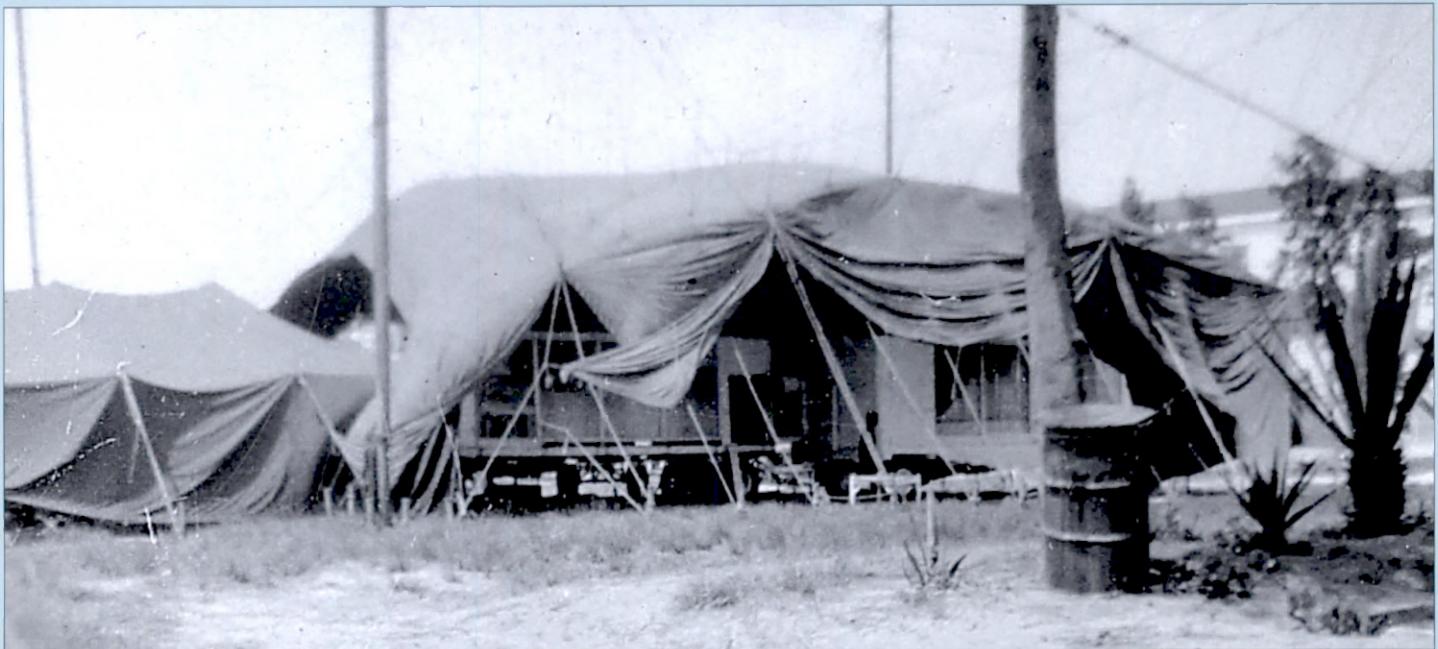
*Looking East from second floor Menagerie building. At bottom of picture is the Winter Quarters commissary, behind it the tractor garage and truck repair shed, tent house office wagons, buildings in background are wood mill, seat dept., wagon repair shop, and behind the tent is where the practice top was taken down shortly before I took the picture.*



*Looking South-East from the second floor of Menagerie building. Monkey House and Island with pygmy hippopotamus moat. In foreground elephant building behind it to left of that is camel & zebra barn, also working horse barn, wild animal practice tent and open air 3 rings and track.*



*Looking East from the second floor of Menagerie building. At bottom is the harness making building, behind it the performing horse stables, and in far rear is the horse practice barns and wild animal act practice barn.*

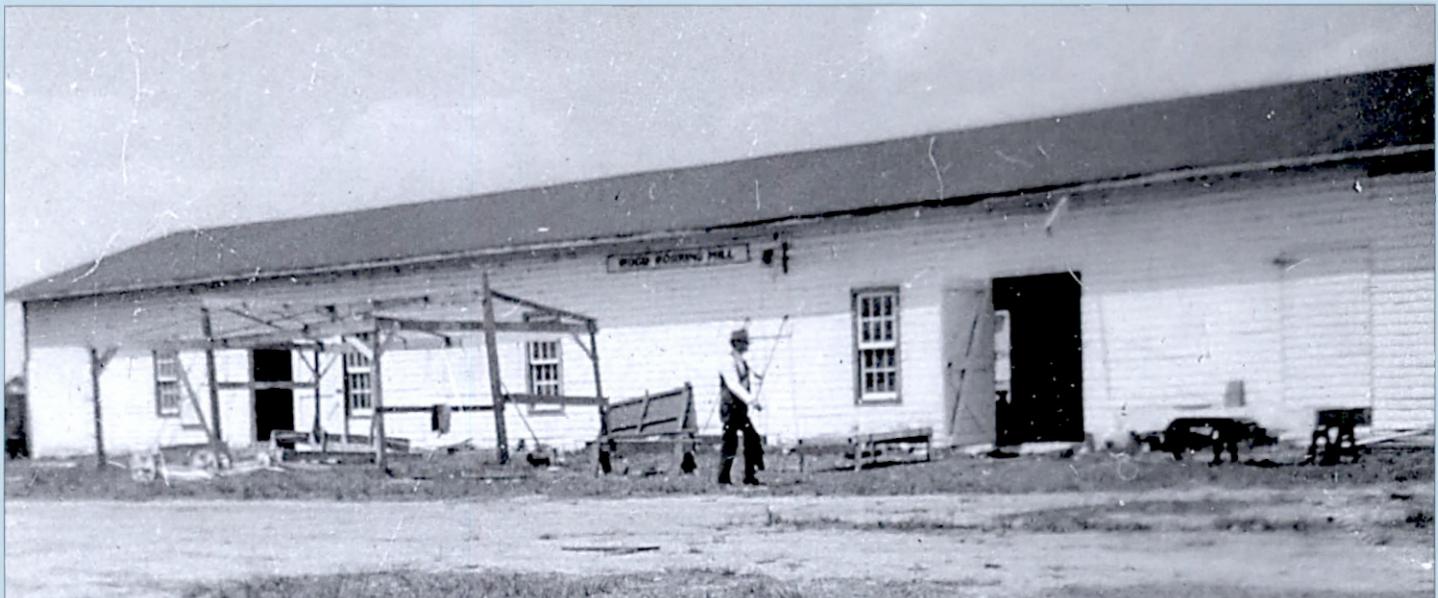


(Above) This is the poleless tent housing the two gorillas, Gargantua and his mate M'Toto. Their air conditioned cage can be seen beneath it. This tent acted as preview of the big top of tomorrow.



(Left) This is the building housing all blues (bleacher seats), bible backs (chair stands), jacks, and stringers (chair stands supports)

(Below) This is the wood mill at Winter Quarters.

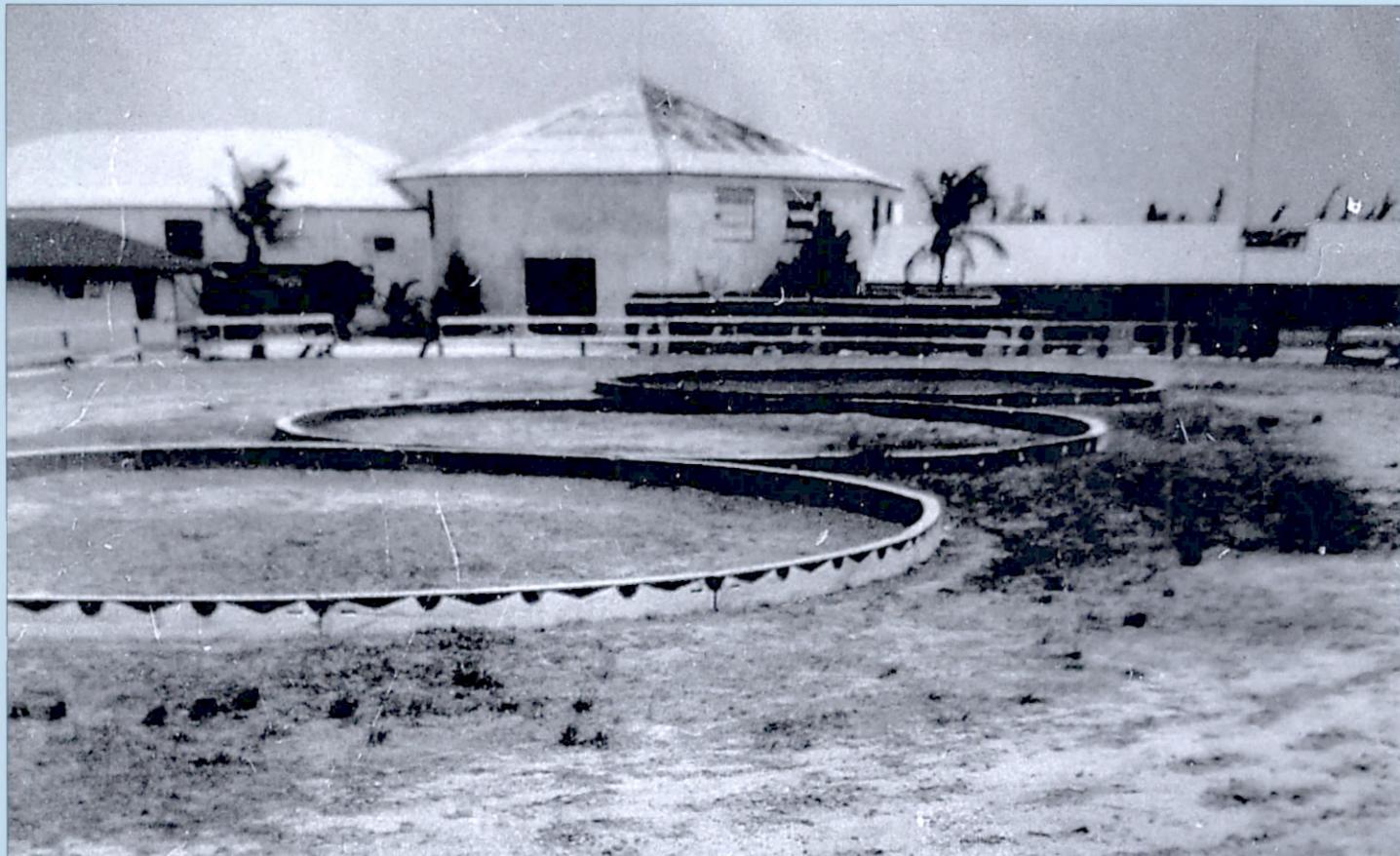




*A poor picture of the Elephant Kraal at Winter Quarters. A practice ring is in the center of it. Dimly you can see the elephants in their stalls.*



*A corner view of the performing horse stables. Kept very nice.*



*Outside rings and track for outdoor shows. In background octagonal building is indoor practice for wild animal act, long building to right houses the animals, and to left is horseback riding building corner of performing horse stables in view.*



*Doctors office and hospital at Winter Quarters. To the right of it is where the practice top stood. Taken down shortly before picture was taken.*



*Veterinary dept. and offices at Winter Quarters.*



*Dormitory building for the Winter Quarters working men. Others are scattered through the Quarters for other departments.*



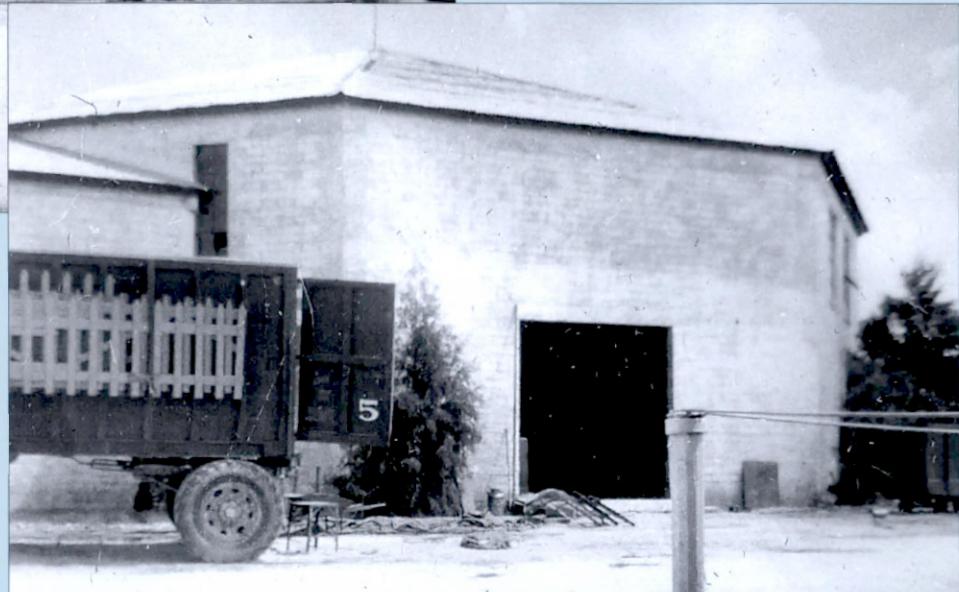
*First octagonal building is for the practice of liberty and ménage horses, long central portion of building for practice of bareback riders, and last octagonal building for rehearsal of wild animal act.*



*Bareback practice barn taken from entrance to performing horse stables.*

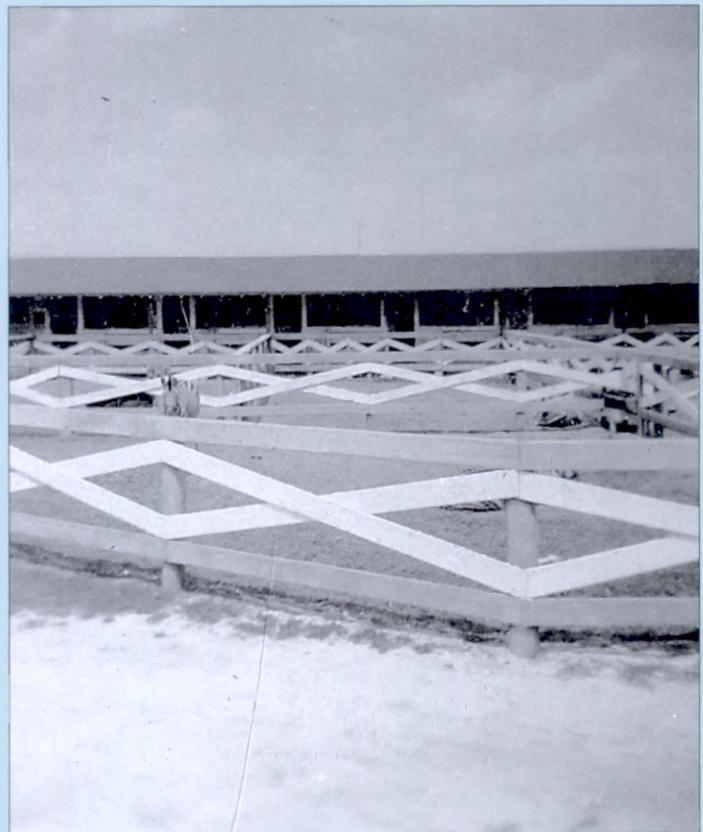


*Barn for the practice and rehearsal of the wild animals acts. Wagon is that taking care of animal cage props and such. On the lot during the season it is used by the Courts who have the animal acts on the show.*





*In background is the permanent cage house for Alfred Court's animals. In front are the small cages used for the animals while the show is in the Garden.*



*Barn and stables housing walking stock such as camels, llamas (which are in the picture), zebras, etc.*



*This horse belongs to the Cristiani troupe of bareback riders and is stabled in the walking horse barn.*



*Camels in the walking stock barn and corrals at Winter Quarters.*



*Baby camel in the walking stock barn and corral at Winter Quarters. This baby camel isn't many weeks old at time of picture. It was born on the way to Winter Quarters from the Goebels animal farm in California.*



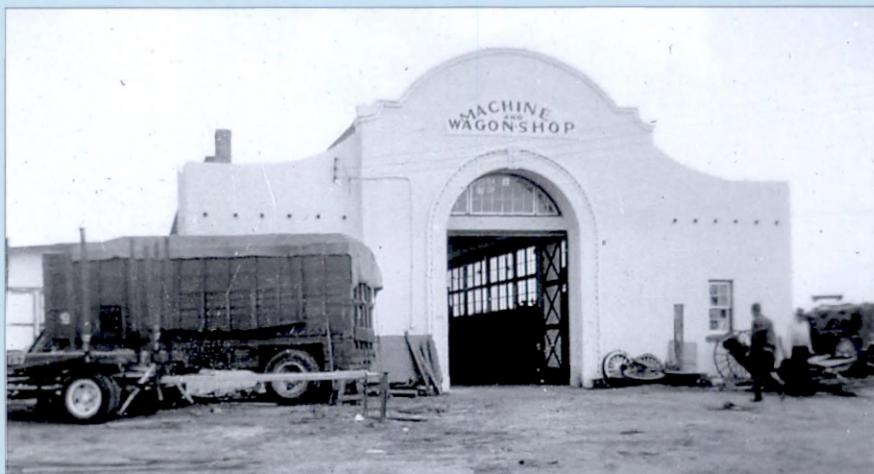
*Mother camel in the walking stock barn and corral at Winter Quarters.*



*Zebras in the walking stock barn and corral at Winter Quarters.*



*Old water wagons outside of the wagon and repair shop at Winter Quarters. In far background are two burned and scarred giraffe wagons from the menagerie fire in Cleveland, Ohio, of August 4, 1942.*



*(Left) Wagon making shop, repair, blacksmith, and machine shop at Winter Quarters.*

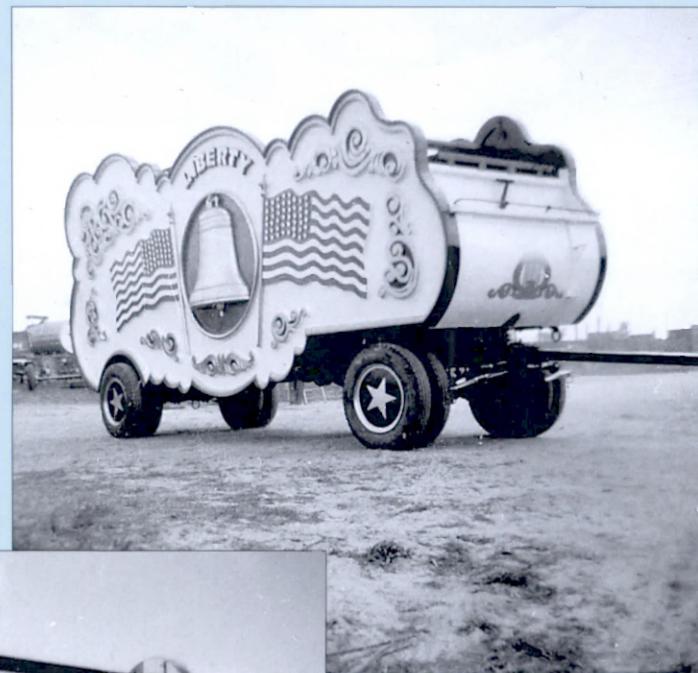


*(Right) The Blacksmith dept. of the wagon making and repair shop at Winter Quarters.*



(Above) Distant view of the wagon making and repair shop showing the new Liberty Bandwagon used in opening spec Hold Your Horses, looking straight past this view is where the practice top stood. Taken down shortly before the picture was taken.

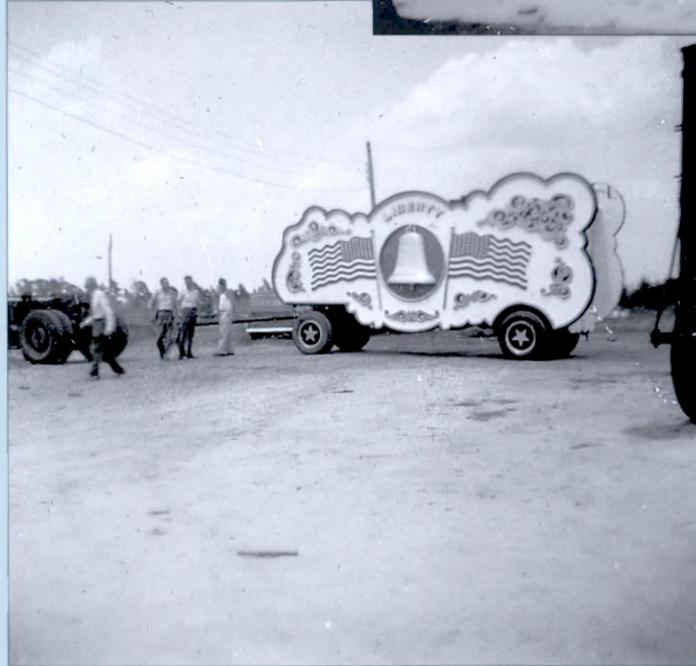
(Below) Side view of wagon showing photographer walking back to his camera.



(Above) Front view of the new Liberty Bandwagon taken just prior to those taken by the show photographer who had not yet set up.

(Left) Note Photographers's car in the background.

(Below) Men are standing back so photographer can set his lens. Though I beat him to the picture.





An old wagon of the former Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto show at Winter Quarters. An old Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto stock car is in the background.



The old United States Bandwagon in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters.



The old United States Bandwagon in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters. This wagon was used in many old street parades. Wagon at time of picture was being stripped of its carvings to be put on cage wagons in the 1943 opening spec Hold Your Horses.



Pile of old wheels in a corner of the walking stock barn and corral at Winter Quarters. Many beautiful sunburst wheels are laying in the pile.



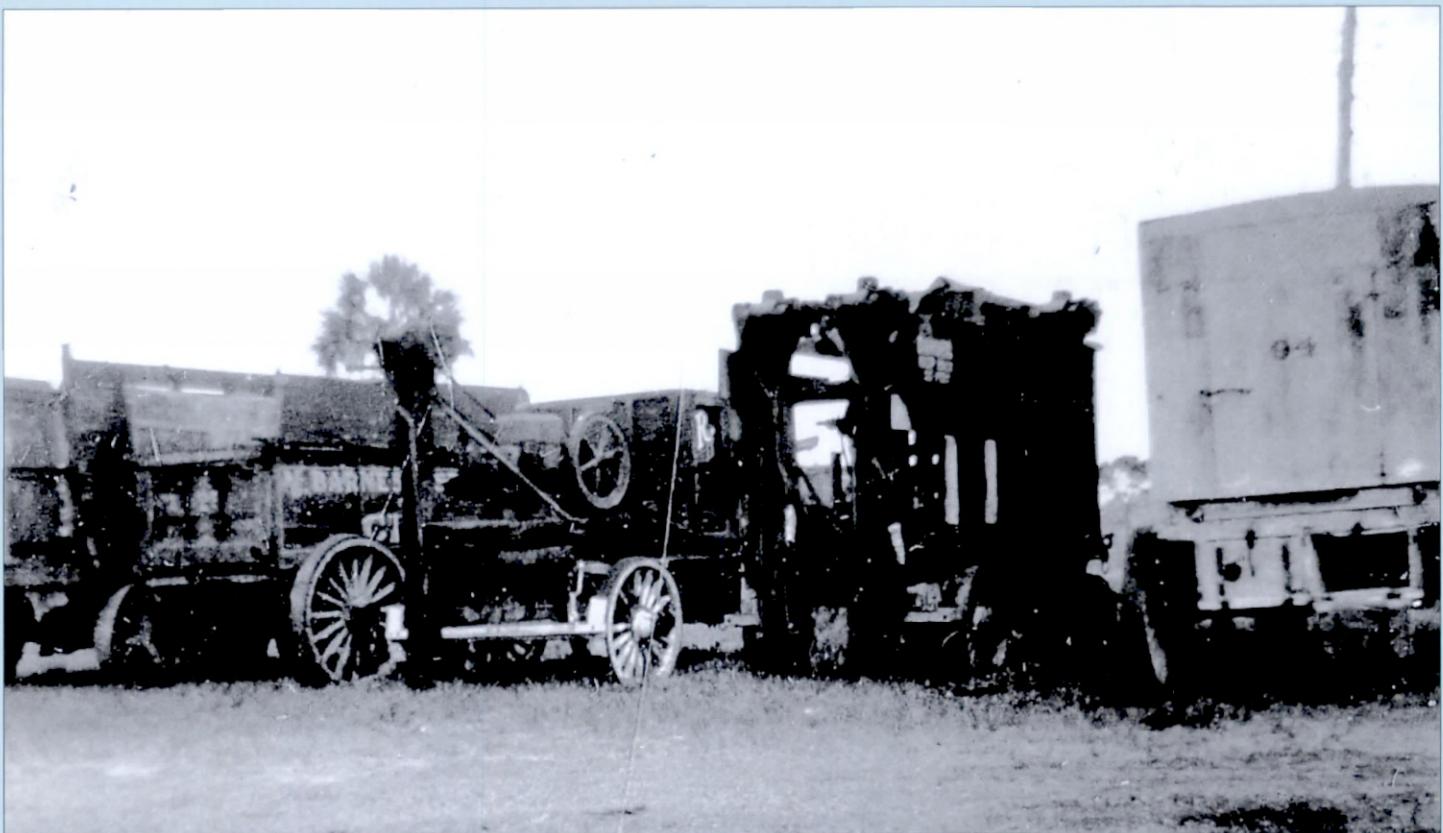
This is a really a very large wagon and is in the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters. What dept. this wagon was used in I don't know, but it was a nice looking wagon and is very large.



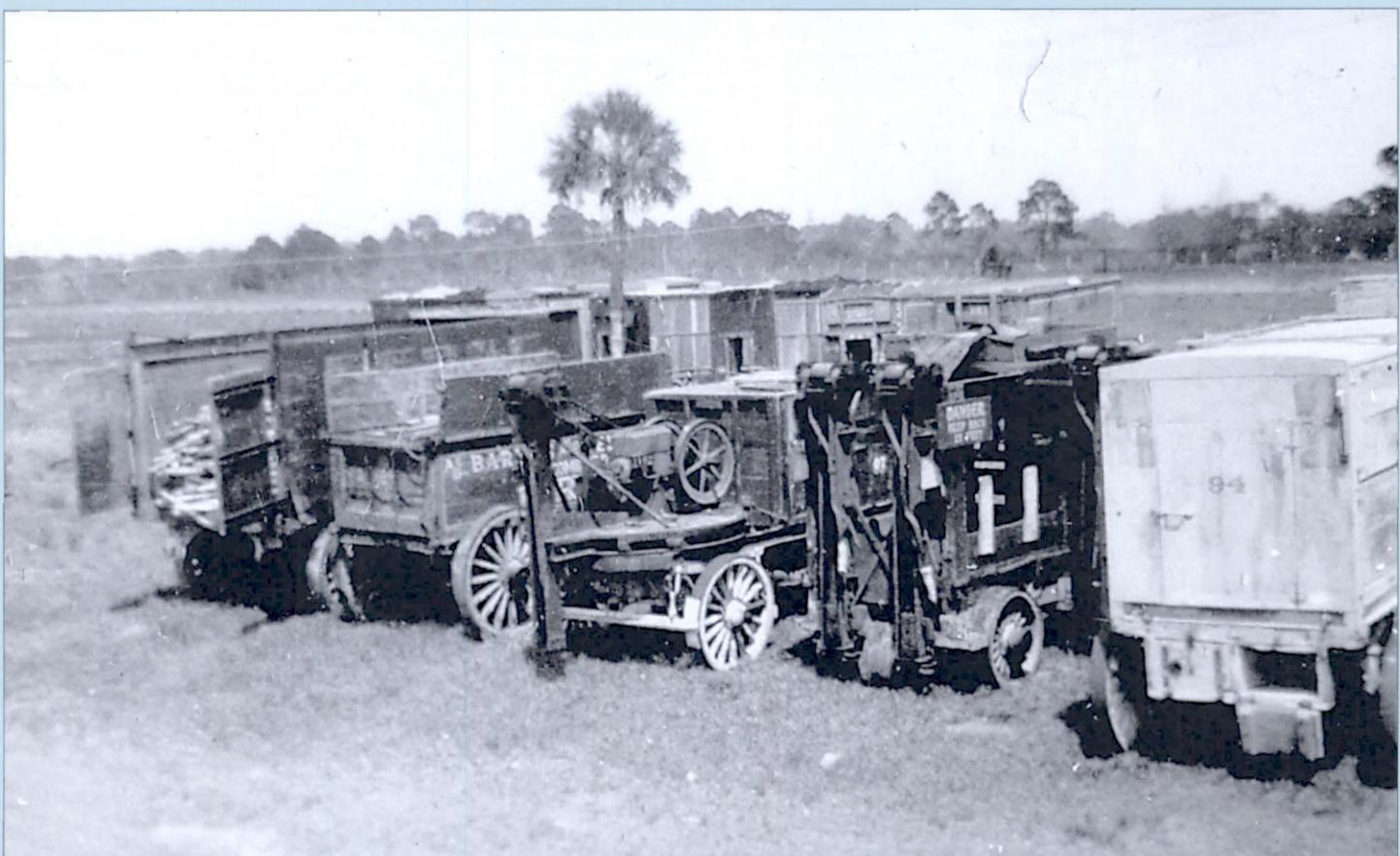
An old Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto stock car in the railroad yards at Winter Quarters.



A distant view of the wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters. Most of the wagons shown here are cage wagons. Some of them from the old Al G. Barnes Circus.



*More wagons in the old graveyard at Winter Quarters. The triple stake driver was formerly on the old Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto Circus. Wagon to right of it is a seal wagon.*



*Some of the wagons in the old wagon graveyard at Winter Quarters.*

## ***Kenneth A. "Dick" Anderson*** ***by Deborah W. Walk***



*Mary Jane Miller and Dick Anderson on lot.*

In the Tibbals Collection, there are three circus albums compiled by Kenneth A. "Dick" Anderson (1921-1996) that contain pictures of circus performers and a diary of life at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey winter quarters in 1943. While there are press photographs in the albums, many of the images were taken by Anderson. He annotated each photograph with captions that identify the individuals, performance, act and date.

Dick Anderson was born in Delaware. One of his early memories was skipping school to visit the circus lot and being "totally entranced and fascinated by this world of wonder."<sup>1</sup> In junior high school, he became interested in acrobatics. When he graduated from high school in 1939, he was a fine tumbler known for his acrobatic stunts. He and a couple of friends formed their own acrobatic troupe. In 1941, a Shrine Circus came to town and the troupe tried to join up. While the troupe did not get a job, Anderson got a chance to work as a catcher. From that moment, he knew he wanted to be a flyer. He wrote Art Concello and received an invitation to try out. While his parents objected, Anderson "pleaded that circus life was his ambition."<sup>2</sup> In 1942, he joined the Navy, but because of a brain concussion, his ser-

vice was cut short and he returned to the Ringling show for the 1943 season. During his performing years, he also wrote for *The Billboard* column "Dressing Room Gossip." In 1943, he joined the CHS and was known as an ardent circus collector who had made "several outstanding albums covering his years with the circus."<sup>3</sup> For 25 years, he performed on Ringling, Clyde Beatty, and Russell Bros. and with a number flying trapeze troupes such as the Clarkonians, Flying Concellos, Flying Behees, Aerial Andersons, Flying Harold, and Saberjets.

In the 1950s in addition to performing, he landed roles in the movies: *Storm Warning* (1951—intern); *April in Paris* (1952—circus performer); *Story of Three Loves* (1953—Jacques); *Trapeze* (1956—double for Burt Lancaster); and *Merry Andrews* (1959—Ugo). In 1961, Anderson worked in the last segment of the *Project 20*, which featured Fay Alexander. To keep in shape, Anderson became a body builder and was showcased in an article in *Muscle Builder* and photographs in other body building magazines.<sup>4</sup> After retiring, he drove the shuttle between Wilmington and Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, he returned to writing about his circus memories in a column for *Circus Report* titled "Reflections." In 1996, Dick Anderson died in Wilmington and was buried in the Riverview Cemetery.

### ***About Dick Anderson***

A "Good Guy" both personally and professionally. This term certainly applies to Dick Anderson. He was my catcher in the flying act on Ringling and I was able to know him as a performer and friend. Dick was always the gentleman. I never saw him angry or upset towards anyone. Dick was also the most devoted son, always keeping his mother's wellbeing in life. Dick loved the circus including performers, working gangs and bosses. He felt privileged to be with the big show and he kept up with it with endless pictures and writing which the museum has discovered.

Mary Jane Miller

### **Endnotes**

1. "Reflections," *Circus Report*, no. 23 (June 7, 1993), 14.
2. "'Dick' Anderson's Dream Comes True; He's a Full-Fledged Circus Acrobat," *The Sunday Morning Star* (Wilmington, DE), June 7, 1942, 33.
3. "Circus Historical Society," *The Billboard*, May 22, 1943, 42.
4. Warner, Hal. "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *Muscle Builder*, vol. 9 no. 3 (November 1957), 22-3, 55.
5. "Kenneth Anderson, 75, trapeze artist," *Sunday News Journal* (Wilmington DE), June 2, 1996, B4.

# RINGLING BROS and BARNUM & BAILEY



OFFICIAL *Souvenir Guide*  
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